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ANOTHER MOMENT AND ONE OF HER OUTSTRETCHED ARMS WAS GRASPED.

OR, The Owls of the Overland.

A Tale of Border Mystery.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "LIEUTENANT LEO," "THE BUCK-
SKIN ROVERS," "BUCK TAYLOR,"
"MERLE, THE MIDDY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A GRAVE BETWEEN THEM.

A VIVID flash of lightning, that seemed to rend the heavens in twain, followed by a peal of thunder that fairly shook the earth, so startled a horse and rider dashing swiftly along a trail in the far West, that the animal sprung forward with a wild neigh of fright, and bounded swiftly along beyond the power of control.

The rider was a woman, who, terrified, uttered a cry of alarm, and dropping the reins had covered her face with her hands as though blinded by the glare.

Unrestrained by the hand of his rider the horse became maddened by fear, for the lightnings still flashed, the thunder still pealed, while the fierce winds tore huge branches from the trees, threatening to crush both horse and rider.

Unmindful of his course and blinded by fear, the animal dashed from the trail and went, with a mighty leap, over the high bank of a river and fell headlong into the rushing waters below.

Seated upon his horse, in the shelter of a thicket of pines, a man beheld the leap and fall of the animal and his fair rider, for he was but a few paces away.

"For no man would I take this risk; but for a woman, yes!"

The words came through his shut teeth, and as he uttered them his face paled, for he knew the danger.

Instantly he spurred forward, guiding his horse down a ravine and the next moment had ridden the the swollen waters of the torrent.

Not twenty feet from him was the woman rider, swept along upon the current, conscious of the death that faced her; but her horse had disappeared beneath the flood.

Another moment and her outstretched hands were firmly grasped, and she was drawn up to a seat in front of her preserver.

But the flood was too violent for the horse to sustain his double load, and the waters swept over him.

"Have I doomed you also? Leave me to my fate!" came from the lips of the young girl, for such she was.

"No, we live or die together. Have no fear and trust to me."

The words were firmly uttered, and the man slipped from his saddle as he spoke, and grasped with his left arm the waist of the one whom he had risked his life to save.

He was a bold swimmer and struck out manfully for the shore, the current carrying the two swiftly along the while.

It was a desperate battle for life, and several times, as the bold swimmer threatened to go under, the girl said in the calmest tones:

"Release me, sir, and save yourself!"

A grim, defiant smile was his answer, with the words:

"I have fought death before and—conquered."

Yet, in spite of his brave words, he again sunk beneath the waters; but another great effort he made, and just then unexpected help came, for his horse had followed his master and passed near him, swimming for the shore, which was low at this point, and gave promise of a good footing.

"Don't let us die, old boy! Come, save us!"

The words were pleading, and the noble animal, as though to lend what aid he could, headed nearer, and approached near enough for his master to grasp the saddle-horn.

It was a last effort, but he held on, and the weight dragged the horse beneath the waters; but he arose with a frightened snort, plunged wildly, and at last, gaining a footing, he staggered out of the torrent upon the low bank, while the man and the one he had rescued tottered forward and fell their length upon the grassy shore, the one unconscious, the other exhausted.

Panting with his great exertions, the horse stood watching his master, a gleam of pity seeming to rest in his most intelligent eyes.

Utterly prostrated by his herculean efforts, the man lay unable to move, and his broad breast rose and fell convulsively, as though his breath was struggling to leave his body.

Near him, white faced and still as death, lay the limp form of the maiden, whose courage had not failed her through all, but who, when she saw that death had been defeated, had swooned away.

Hers was a beautiful face, young, for she was scarcely seventeen and with innocence and loveliness stamped upon every feature.

Her clinging riding habit of dark homespun revealed a form of wonderful grace and symmetry, while her tiny hands and feet denoted gentle blood. Her rescuer was a man of twenty-five, with a smooth-shaven face which revealed every feature in its full strength.

It was a striking face, one hard to fathom through, and there was something about it that indicated a man who could do a desperate act, or whisper words of love with equal courtly grace.

His hair was dark and cut short, and his eyes had a look such as a stag at bay might hold.

His form was athletic, tall, and his movements full of lazy gracefulness, in spite of the great struggle he had made for life, his own and the maiden's.

He was dressed in a suit of corduroy, the pants being stuck in top boots, and these had made the struggle more severe for him in his desperate swim.

His dark slouch hat was drawn down hard over his eyes, and had remained there, until, with an impatient gesture he had thrown it off as he lay upon the bank.

To a man of his physique recovery from exhaustion was rapid, and he soon arose to his feet and bent over the prostrate form near him.

As he did so, the dark-blue eyes opened and gazed full into his own.

"You have saved me from death. Let that act bridge the chasm between your name and mine."

The words were uttered in a low tone, full of earnestness, and the answer came almost sternly from the man's lips:

"Amen!"

"You know who I am?" she asked.

"Yes, you are the sister of Horace Manners, whom I killed in a duel!" was the firm reply.

She shuddered, but asked:

"Did you know me when you came to my rescue?"

"Yes."

"Then the past is wiped out, I pledge you. There is my hand on it," and the man grasped firmly the little outstretched hand.

CHAPTER II.

SWEETHEART NUMBER THIRTEEN.

THREE years prior to the scene just related, and which was in a frontier State, where the houses of settlers were few and far between, and danger from red-skin raids was constantly to be feared by the bold pioneers, a party of young men were gathered in a room in an Eastern college. They were students, and a gay-looking set they were. Their faces were flushed with wine, for they had been out to some midnight orgie, and, returning to the college building they had not cared to go to bed, but had assembled in the comfortable rooms of one of their number and were enjoying the time according to their bent.

The rooms were handsomely furnished, a parlor and bedchamber, and the young man who dwelt in them was the son of a Texan cattle-killing, rich, handsome, wild and extravagant.

There were paintings, engravings and prints upon the walls, easy-chairs and a lounge, a side-board with decanters of liquors, swords, pistols, rifles and shot-guns, showing a sporting turn of mind, as well as an artistic one, in the occupant and many specimens of the chase, from a bear robe to a buffalo head.

Kent Kingdon was the name of the proprietor of the rooms, and, though a "sport" in college, he was also a student.

He was an athlete, a dead shot, kept his horse and his negro valet, and enjoyed life to its full measure of enjoyment.

He was popular with professors, and pupils as well, and was generous to a fault, as many a poor student had had reason to know.

And yet he was a man to dread! There was something about him that begat fear.

Perhaps it was the fact that he was known to have "killed his man" in a personal encounter when a mere boy in Texas, and on account of great physical strength and deadly aim with pistol or rifle.

He was a favorite among the ladies, and many hearts had he conquered, it was said.

Still, with living witnesses of his fickle nature and heartlessness toward the sex, there were not wanting other fair girls to love him, and like moths they flickered about a brilliant flame which they could not but know would cause them sorrow and suffering.

As Kent Kingdon has already been described as to his face and physique, in the daring horseman who, several years after his college life had saved Mabel Manners from drowning in a frontier river, a description of him is useless now.

In the room with him were half a dozen boon companions, among them a young man of twenty-one, with handsome face and form, and whose name was Horace Manners.

He was the son of an Ohio merchant, who was reported wealthy, but whom Horace had only the day before discovered was in great financial embarrassment.

He had expected a large check from his father to help him over Christmas, for it was but several days before that eventful yearly period,

and instead had gotten a letter which told him that not a dollar could be sent, and that he had better square up his matters and prepare to come home and go to work.

His father told him that he would send him money to arrange his accounts with, and to come out home with, but that he must compromise as best he could, for a couple of hundreds would be all that he could spare.

Horace Manners was dealt a severe blow by this letter.

He was not an extravagant fellow, and withal a favorite with all who knew him.

But he was engaged to a beautiful girl in the village, and it had been agreed that they were to be married when he graduated, and she was to go with him to his home.

He had given her a number of costly presents, and to do this, as his father had been slow in remitting the past several months, he had borrowed money from several friends.

That day, after receiving the letter, he had gone to Kent Kingdon, with whom he was on fairly friendly terms, and asked for a loan.

He wished to pay all his debts, and had purchased a Christmas present for his lady-love, which also was to be paid for.

When his father's check came he would pay back part of the loan to Kingdon and start for home, asking time on the balance.

"How much do you want, Manners?" Kent Kingdon had asked, promptly, when Horace Manners had asked for a loan, telling him his remittances were delayed.

"A thousand dollars, and it is a large sum, Kingdon."

"A little steep, but I got a handsome check to-day from home, so can oblige you," was the reply, and he gave a bank draft for the amount.

Every dollar that Horace Manners owed in the college and the town were paid, the present was gotten for his lady-love, and he had a balance of a hundred or so, after purchasing a gift for Kent Kingdon.

It was several nights after that the two, with others, were assembled in Kingdon's rooms, and enjoying themselves.

Suddenly Horace Manners took up a handsome album that lay upon the table, and started as he opened it at a certain photograph.

It was the likeness of a young girl of rare beauty, with a dark, Spanish-like face, and eyes that seemed to look into one's soul.

The photograph had been beautifully painted, and beneath it was written:

"SWEETHEART No. 13.

"Beautiful, loving, but jealous as a Turk, therefore dangerous."

"We are quits, and nothing hurt but a heart."

"My God! Kingdon, where did you get this picture?" cried Horace Manners, springing to his feet.

All were startled by his vehement manners, excepting Kent Kingdon, who said:

"Ah, Manners, I see that you have my private album, which I supposed was locked."

"But the picture?" hotly said Manners.

"Ah, yes, that was given me by the lady's sweet self, when we were love."

"Do you mean to say that this lady gave you this picture?"

"Yes, and I painted it myself."

"Quite well done, is it not?"

"Do you mean that you were once lovers?"

"Certainly; but she was so devilish jealous, so exacting, I gave her up, consigned her to the grave of buried loves, and so that picture is her monument, you know."

Horace Manners was as white as a corpse.

His lips were colorless, and his whole frame quivered with passion.

"Kent Kingdon, this is the likeness of a lady who is to be my wife."

"She has told me that she never loved another man than myself, never was engaged, and I throw the lie that you have uttered against her back into your teeth."

"Shall I emphasize it with a blow?"

All were on their feet and every eye was upon Kent Kingdon, who still remained seated, and, with the utmost coolness said:

"No need of that, Mr. Manners, for the lie is quite sufficient cause for insult."

"By the way, as the insulted party, let me ask my friend Lawton here, to find out whether you prefer pistols or swords, for I have both here, and suppose we arrange the matter at once, for see, the moon is at its full, and we can soon walk to a suitable spot."

No man could have spoken with more perfect coolness, upon an ordinary matter, than did Kent Kingdon upon this matter of life and death.

The preliminaries for a hostile meeting were

at once arranged, swords were the weapons chosen, and the whole party adjourned to a wood near by the collage to settle the affair by a personal combat.

CHAPTER III.

"A MURDERER AT LARGE."

So strong was Horace Manners in his trust in the woman to whom he was engaged, that he could not believe that Kent Kingdon had done other than spoken falsely.

He had never, in his year at college, heard the name of the lady connected with that of Kingdon, and he believed what she told him, that he was her first and only love.

In his fury at Kingdon, his pain at finding his sweetheart's picture in a man's album, Horace Manners forgot everything but a desire to punish the one who had cast a slur publicly upon the one he so dearly loved.

He would listen to no reason, and the party adjourned to a secluded spot, Manners uttering no word, his face livid, his teeth shut tight upon his lips.

He had selected swords as the weapons to be used, and so the two had agreed upon them, for a report of pistols might cause an alarm.

The spot was reached, the arrangements were made, and the two seconds placed the weapons in the hands of their principals.

Up to that moment Kent Kingdon had smoked a cigar, and seemed rather bored than otherwise, at having to leave his comfortable rooms at that time of night.

The moon was at its full, and shone in a perfectly clear sky, so all was as bright as day almost, and the scene revealed was a striking one.

The students were all flushed with wine, and had drunk more deeply before leaving Kingdon's rooms, while he joined them, though Horace Manners did not, but went with his second to his room to get his swords.

He was silent, cool, and yet his heart and brain were on fire.

He was a noted swordsman, but had never crossed blades with Kingdon, though it had been agreed that they should sometime have a bout but it was little thought by their respective champions that it would be a hostile meeting.

When all was in readiness Kent Kingdon threw away his cigar, and a moment after the blades came together with an angry clash.

The half-dozen onlookers held their breath in fear and trembling.

The second of Horace Manners had urged him to disarm Kingdon and give him his life, and the reply had been:

"I will do so, and then seek an explanation of the one he has maligned.

"If she says his words are false, then shall I challenge him again."

The second of Kingdon had made the same request of his principal, and he had responded:

"A life can only wipe out the insult he gave me, Lawton."

That both were splendid swordsmen was seen at a glance; but Kingdon seemed to awake from his lazy manner and pressed his adversary from the start.

He held no mercy in his heart, and after a fierce combat of several minutes drove his sword through the body of Horace Manners.

The wounded man sunk to the ground and said:

"God forgive him! he has killed me."

"I so meant to do," was the calm reply and Kent Kingdon coolly wiped the blade of his sword and retraced his way to his rooms.

Horace Manners was at once borne to his quarters and a surgeon sent for.

After a thorough examination the surgeon said that he had received his death wound, and must die, though he might live several days.

Then the second of Kingdon went to his principal and told him he must fly.

"We have all decided to keep the matter a secret until his death, and that will give you some time to escape in, so start at once, Kingdon."

"I guess it is best, for here they would imprison me for fighting a duel."

"They would hang you."

"Ah! that would be bad, so I will go."

"Sell out my traps here, Lawton, and keep the money until you hear from me."

"Now I will pack off and get away on the early train."

Two hours after Kent Kingdon was a fugitive from justice, and Horace Manners dying the following night, the affair became known and large rewards were offered for the murderer, as the slayer was called by the press and the people.

Horace Manners was laid to rest in the little churchyard, upon the hill, and it was said by many that the one to whom he had been engaged was utterly heartless, for she had gone to his burial and not a tear had she shed, while her face was calm and emotionless.

By a strange coincidence the day after the funeral, the second of Kent Kingdon, Hugh Lawton, following the advice given him, opened the letters coming for his fugitive friend, discovered by one that speculation had swamped his father, and that a few thousand dollars had been placed to his credit, all that he need expect from him in the future.

When, a month after, Hugh Lawton had a letter from Kent Kingdon, it came from a frontier town, and thither his accumulated correspondence, and the money from the sale of his things, was sent.

In time a reply came, and it read:

"MY DEAR LAWTON:—

"It seems that Fate is rather hard upon me, for where I expected a large fortune I get nothing but a few paltry thousands.

"The sum, however, is sufficient for me to lay the foundation for a fortune here, and I shall become a ranchero, as in Texas, and hope some day to have you visit me.

"I have knocked about the border pretty generally, under an assumed name; but I hate dodging under a name not my own, so shall settle down in some secluded spot and be known as Kent Kingdon as of yore.

"If I am tracked here, so be it, I shall abide the result.

"Many thanks for your work in my behalf and good friendship.

"I note what you say about the fair Number Thirteen having no heart, or love for poor Manners.

"The fact is she has too much heart.

"Still waters run deep," and I would not care to face that woman, though I have no make-up of fear in my composition.

"Heaven prosper you, my dear Lawton, and when I am prosperous expect to hear from me, but not before, as now I am a fugitive, with a few thousands in hand, pluck and determination to carve out my own fortune in whatever part of the world I may be, or in whatever I undertake to do, be it good or bad.

"Again thanking you, believe me, my dear fellow,

"Your fugitive friend,

"KENT KINGDON,

"Murderer at Large."

And thus it was, with the reception of this letter by Hugh Lawton, Kent Kingdon dropped out of the memory of those who had known him, all excepting one person.

Who that one was will be made known in good time.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASTER OF REFUGE RANCH.

IN writing to his son, Horace, Doctor Manners, as he was called from having graduated as a physician, though afterward becoming a merchant, had told him the truth about his financial affairs.

He had indorsed heavily for a friend, whom he supposed to have protected him with securities, and when called upon to pay found that the collateral was worthless.

Thus he had been forced to the wall.

A high-spirited man he had sacrificed everything to pay his creditors, and found himself with but a couple of thousand dollars left, and a family to support.

His son had been sent to an Eastern college to receive a fine education, and his daughter, Mabel, a beautiful girl of fourteen was at boarding-school.

Doctor Manners had written a letter to his son, telling him all about his affairs, and inclosing a check for three hundred dollars, which he hoped would square up his little debts at college and bring him home, when a telegram came to him.

It read:

"Regret to say that your son was seriously wounded in a duel with a fellow student last night.

"Will give him every care and wire you as to his condition."

This was signed by Henry Wallpole, the second of Horace Manners.

The blow was a bitter one, and the stricken man went home to convey the news to his wife, and then to start East by the first train.

Mabel was sent for from boarding school, and Doctor Manners left for the bedside of his son.

Ere he arrived Horace Manners had breathed his last; but he was in time for the funeral, and afterward had a long talk with Camille Cameron, the maiden to whom his son had been engaged.

Of that interview nothing was known to outsiders, and then Doctor Manners sought out both Henry Wallpole and Hugh Lawton, with the other students who had witnessed the fatal

affair from beginning to end, and heard their story.

"I fear my poor boy was too rash in what he did.

"Perhaps if he had asked Kingdon alone, and in a different manner, he would have explained about the picture," said Doctor Manners, sadly, addressing Henry Wallpole.

Back to his broken home went Doctor Manners, and as he sped along he decided upon his course.

He would go to the Far West, homestead some land, and begin the practice of medicine among the settlers.

He wished to get away from all who had known him, to hide himself in some spot where he, his ruin, and his sorrows were unknown.

To his wife and daughter he told his plans, and one day they started, with two faithful old family servants, a man and his wife, for their new home.

They went at random, but happened upon a locality that was most desirable.

The land was fertile, the country was heavily timbered, there was good grazing for stock and plenty of streams.

He built a substantial and commodious log cabin, furnished it with what he had brought with him, bought some cattle, and hung out his shingle on the front gate.

It read:

"HORACE MANNERS,

"Physician Surgeon."

He named his place Refuge Ranch, and with his wife and daughter took the greatest interest in their new home.

Neighbors were like angels' visits are said to be, few and far between, for the nearest one was three miles away.

But the news of a physician having settled in the country flew far and wide, and the doctor was called upon to go forty miles from home at times to visit a patient, and his practice soon kept him busy.

One day a band of red-skin Sioux, upon the war-path, swept down upon the settlement and drove off the doctor's herd of fine cattle, killing one of the cowboys and capturing the other who had charge of them.

They were met by a young ranchero and two of his herders, attacked and defeated, and the cowboy prisoner was rescued and the cattle secured to a hoof.

The young ranchero was wounded slightly, and the cowboy who had been rescued hastily drove his cattle back home and made known to the doctor what had occurred.

The settlement was already aroused, and the settlers were loud in the praise of the young ranchero, who had lately settled in their neighborhood, having bought a ranch and its stock from a widow whose husband had been killed, and who was therefore anxious to return to her old home in the East.

The doctor had started at once to the ranch to see the wounded young man, and thank him for all he had done for him.

The ranch was twenty miles away from Refuge Ranch, and the furthest one away toward the Indian country.

Arriving at the ranch, Doctor Manners had found it a comfortable place, and saw that there were numbers of cattle grazing near, with a dozen cowboys watching them.

To a cowboy who approached him, he said:

"How is the ranchero, may I ask?"

"He is wounded, pard; got hurt in a scrimmage with the red-skins yesterday."

"Yes, so I heard, and it was in rescuing one of my herders and saving my cattle, for which I am most grateful to him."

"You has cause to be, pard."

"Will you go on with me and tell him Doctor Manners has called to see him?"

"I'll go, for the cap'n is wounded pretty severe I guesses, though he says it's nothing."

They rode on to the cabin together and the cowboy went in with his message.

He soon returned with a puzzled look on his face, and said:

"The cap'n says, pard, he don't want no doctor."

"But, my dear sir, I am anxious to see him, to thank him and serve him for all he has done."

"I told him so; but he says no."

"I fear he is more severely wounded than you think, for this seems like a message from a man suffering with fever."

"Go and ask him again to see me."

"What is your name, pard?"

"Doctor Horace Manners, and I am both a physician and surgeon, tell him."

The man again disappeared and soon returned with the remark:

"The capt'in told me to tell you, pard, that his name was Kent Kingdon, and he guessed as how you didn't want to see him."

"Kent Kingdon! my God!" and the doctor fairly staggered under the blow.

For a moment he stood in silence, his face very pale, and said slowly:

"Go and tell Mr. Kent Kingdon that I come as a professional man, in the line of my duty to a human being, and neither as friend or foe."

"Tell him that if his wound is slight, never mind; but if serious, then I think he should see me."

The cowboy looked surprised, but went off with his message.

In a short while he returned, and said:

"Cap'n Kingdon says he'll see you, sir, professionally, and thanks you, for he has a bullet in his side somewhere."

Doctor Manners's lips quivered for an instant, and he seemed very nervous; but conquering his emotion, he said:

"Lead me to him."

CHAPTER V.

DON, THE CARD KING.

AFTER his flight from his college room, following the fatal duel with Horace Manners, Kent Kingdon had gone, as thousands have before him, to seek a haven of refuge in the far West.

He had laid his plans so as to elude all pursuit, changed his name, and one day found himself in a border town with but little money left.

Then he wrote to Hugh Lawton, and received the letter telling him of the loss of his father's fortune, and inclosing drafts under his assumed name, for the amount of the sales of his furniture and other things in his rooms.

"Well, I've got my fortune in my hand," he said grimly, and he paced the floor for a long while in deepest meditation.

But he was no man to be cast down by ill-luck, and he rallied quickly.

"I must do something for a living, so what shall it be?"

"I hate work, and I won't work, so that settles it."

"No one out here needs a fencing, or dancing master, and as for teaching a man how to shoot, they are all experts with a gun."

"I'm a passable engineer, but it will be some time before a railroad penetrates these wilds."

"Digging in the mines is work, no matter what the pay, so I must look to something else."

"I can turn cowboy, but that is a hard life, though a lazy one."

"Let me see! I play an excellent game of cards, in fact, was called an expert with the pasteboards."

"I'll practice up and cast my fortune on chance."

"I'll turn gambler, that's what I'll do, for I have a good nerve, quick eye and steady hand, and a gambler needs all three, especially in these parts."

"Yes, I'll turn gambler." And turn gambler he did, playing with strange success, and becoming known in the border camps as Don the Card King.

From place to place he drifted, until one night in a frontier town, a stranger, who had lost heavily, boldly told him that he was a card thief.

Kingdon had several times been in scenes where his nerve and coolness had saved his life, and he had the reputation wherever he was known, for being a very dangerous man, one whom it was not well to arouse.

All eyes were upon him when the insult was given, and they saw that he was wholly unmoved.

In fact his voice was strangely musical and even as he asked:

"My friend, where do you hail from?"

"Down in the Blue Valley," was the gruff reply.

"Your name, please?"

"Ben Crawford, and wholly at your service, you infernal card sharp."

Not a shadow crossed the Card King's face at this, but he asked:

"How much do you consider yourself worth, Mr. Ben Crawford?"

"I'm worth enough to wipe you out, if you dare meet me."

"Are you a miner, settler or cattleman, please tell me?"

"I've got a snug farm, down in Blue Valley, a good home on it, plenty of cattle and owe nothing."

"Good! Well now I have double the value of

your property in that iron box there, and, Mr. Ben Crawford, as you seem to desire to beat me, and have insulted me before all these people, let me tell you that I'll meet you now in this room, with rifle, revolver or bowie-knife, and if you kill me you take my money with my life."

"If I kill you then I take your farm and all on it, so make out the papers."

"I've got a wife."

"That's unfortunate for her; but she shall not suffer, I promise."

"I'll see you, Don, the Card King, so just name your weapons," shouted Ben Crawford excitedly.

"First let us draw up the papers, as to our property."

This was done, and then Kingdon said:

"Now, sir, what is your choice, in the way of a weapon?"

"Revolvers, with no limit as to shots, as long as we can shoot, and each stand across this room against the wall, and Landlord Ross here to give the word to fire."

"I am willing, sir, so let us take our positions," was the cool reply of Kingdon.

There were those present who knew Ben Crawford as a dead shot and a bad man when wronged, as he considered that he had been, and they supposed that the gambler had met his match.

But the extreme coolness of Kingdon reassured others in his favor, and the betting, for there were many bets taking in that wild crowd upon the result, was rather in favor of the Card King.

Landlord Ross, the proprietor of the place which was tavern, bar, gambling saloon and stage station combined, stepped forward to play his part in the tragedy to be enacted, and his manner seemed to imply that he was rather pleased with the honor done him of giving the word to fire.

"Gents, take yer stands, if you please," he said with a smile meant to be courtly.

The two men stepped to their positions in silence, while the crowd divided into two parts, and stood on either side of the duelists.

They had divided themselves in regard to their bets, with the Card King's friends on one side, and Ben Crawford's admirers on the other.

"Gents, is yer bets all made and money posted on the result o' this death-duel?" called out Landlord Ross, with an eye to business, and accommodation to the lookers-on.

A few bets more were offered and taken, and then the landlord said:

"Fightin' Pard, is yer ready?"

"I certainly am," was the calm response of the Card King, while Ben Crawford said, gruffly:

"Yes, go ahead, for I want to win the money I have bet on myself."

A laugh went around at this plucky answer, and then came the words of Landlord Ross:

"Then shoot!"

Whether Ben Crawford had expected such a sudden response to his request or not, no one knew, but certainly the bullet from the Card King's pistol was through his heart before he pulled trigger.

Still he fired, and his bullet was well-aimed, for a dying man, as it grazed the cheek of his enemy, though the wound was hardly to be counted as such.

With the shot he fell dead in his tracks, and those who had wagered upon the Card King as the victor made the place ring with their cheers, while those who had lost were wise enough to hold their peace, and thus a free fight was avoided.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MASTER OF RECLUSE RANCH.

THE Card King took the killing of Ben Crawford very coolly.

He ordered the man buried, saying:

"As I am his heir I will pay all expenses, landlord."

Then he had drinks set up all round, and went on with his game of cards as though nothing unusual had happened.

The next day he started on horseback for Blue Valley, to see about his legacy from Crawford.

He found a comfortable home in a charming part of the country, and there was every appearance of a thrifty place, and that the farmer was well supplied with this world's goods for a dweller in the Far West.

The wife was a pleasant-faced woman of forty, who received her visitor with civility, and at once asked:

"Do you come to tell me aught of my husband, sir?"

"I regret to say that I do, madam."

"Oh, tell me what has happened?" cried the woman.

"Your husband got into a game of cards with a gambler known as Don, the Card King."

"He accused him of cheating, and the result was a duel in which the gambler killed him."

"My Heaven! I have dreaded evil ever since I came to this country," and the poor woman buried her face in her hands.

"You have my deepest sympathy, madam, I assure you, and, as your husband left to me the settlement of his affairs, my advice to you is that you had better at once go East to your friends, for I will give you a fair cash value for your home, horses and cattle; in fact, all as it stands."

"You are very kind, sir; but to think of Ben being killed, and by a gambler, when he was the dearest of shots and as brave as a lion."

"What was the cause of it, sir?" and the woman's admiration for her husband's prowess caused her anxiety as to how he had been worsted to momentarily outweigh her grief.

"He was not quite quick enough on the shoot, madam."

"Why, he was lightning, all said, in drawing and emptying a weapon."

"It may be, madam, but the other man was a trifle quicker," was the cool reply.

Then the Card King added, consolingly:

"Your husband died game, and with his boots on, my dear Mrs. Crawford, and I had him buried with all honor."

"He was your friend, then, sir?"

"We were most intimately connected up to the last moment of his life."

"In fact, I may say I was the last man that he stretched out his hand toward in life."

"Poor Ben!" moaned the widow.

"He is out of all pain and sorrow, Mrs. Crawford."

"Yes, I think we should be resigned when our loved ones are taken from us, as they go to a far happier land."

"So I've heard, madam."

"You have heard, sir?"

"Why, do you not know that they do?"

"Of course we are so taught, Mrs. Crawford, and you are a brave woman to bear your grief so well."

"Will you not tell me your name, sir, that I may treasure it in my memory?"

"My name is Kent Kingdon, Mrs. Crawford; but do you care to accept my offer to buy your home?"

"It is worth, with the furniture, the land and stock, all of five thousand dollars, sir."

"You have mentioned the sum I meant to offer you, and the money is ready for you now, so I would advise that you lose no time in going eastward."

"I will start to-morrow, sir, for I can go in our ambulance to the stage station."

"And I will accompany you that far, my dear Mrs. Crawford."

And he did, for he was anxious that the widow should meet no one who might tell her the whole truth.

He put her into the stage, after buying her ticket for her, had her trunk and traps put in the boot, and raised his slouch hat in farewell.

But she grasped his hand and said earnestly, while the tears streamed from her eyes:

"Oh, Mr. Kingdon, you have been so good to me, and I do hope you can manage to have that murderer of my poor husband captured and hanged."

"If ever you do, write me, for I have given you my address."

He smiled grimly, raised his hat again, and the Widow Crawford rolled away in the stage, little dreaming who it was that had been so kind to her in her grief.

Charmed with the ranch of Ben Crawford, Kent Kingdon decided to make it his home, and he did so.

The settlers about him called, but though he treated them politely, he never returned their visits, and kept so thoroughly to himself that he soon became known as the Recluse.

Hearing himself so called, he named his place Recluse Ranch, and soon no one went there, believing that the handsome stranger cared not to see them.

He was considered rich, for those parts, his place was well kept up, his cattle increased in numbers, and he seemed greatly to enjoy the lonely life he led away from his fellow-men, for he did not associate even with the cowboys on his ranch.

Several times he had rendered the settlers

good service in the raids made by the Sioux upon the settlement, and it was on such an occasion that Doctor Manners's herder and cattle had been taken by him from the red-skins, not many months after the coming of the Manneses to the settlement.

Having shown in part the career of Kent Kingdon, since he fled after his duel with Horace Manners and became a fugitive, I will now return to the time when Doctor Manners visited Recluse Ranch and found in the wounded man the slayer of his son.

CHAPTER VII. A MAN'S HUMANITY.

THE cabin of Recluse Ranch was certainly a most comfortable one, and there were many reminders about it of the Widow Crawford.

She had been a good housewife, and rug carpets covered the floors, there were book-shelves filled with books, comfortable arm-chairs, and many evidences about of what might be called luxuries in that frontier land.

The cabin had five rooms, one being a kitchen in the rear, and two large rooms on either side of a large hallway, which could be closed in in winter and left open in summer.

On one side were the dining-room and kitchen, and the bedroom of Kent Kingdon.

The other rooms across the hall he did not use, and they were always closed.

Back of the cabin was a smaller one in which his Chinese servants, two in number, dwelt, and they did all the work about the house, the garden and stables, the cowboys, half a dozen in number, living in another cabin a short distance from the main house.

On entering the room where the wounded man lay, Dr. Manners was surprised at the air of comfort and neatness resting upon all about him.

A lounge was drawn up by the open window, and upon it lay Kent Kingdon.

He was pale, and his face showed that he was suffering.

The appearance of the man was striking, and, in spite of the pain he felt, he had an open book in his hand, while a Chinese sat near him waving a fan.

"Mr. Kent Kingdon, I presume?" said Dr. Manners, in a cold tone.

Kent Kingdon saw a tall man, with a fine face, full of intelligence, but wearing a disturbed look just then.

His manners, though cold, were courtly, and he had evidently smothered pride and deep repugnance to do an act of humanity.

"I am Kent Kingdon, sir, and you are Doctor Horace Manners?"

"I am, and I came to thank you for the service you rendered me, and also to aid you all in my power."

"You are most kind, sir."

"No, I am but humane."

"I knew not who you were until I came, but had I done so, I still should have come."

"Now let me examine your wound, sir, for your looks show that it is serious."

"Quite so, for the bullet entered my side, but just what damage it has done, I, of course, do not know."

"You are very good, sir."

The doctor made no reply to this.

He opened his case of surgical instruments, asked the Chinese to get him a bowl of warm water, and drawing aside the clothing, looked intently at the wound.

"It is in a dangerous place, sir," said the doctor, recalling the fact that the sword of Kent Kingdon had pierced the body of his son at about the same spot.

"I have had reason to know that, sir."

"Will you probe for the bullet?"

"Yes, and I regret to say that I have no chloroform or ether to give you."

"It matters not, sir; I am no child to wince from pain."

"I have some brandy, however—"

"I never touch liquor now, sir, of any kind, thank you."

The doctor gazed with increased interest at the man.

He remembered that Hugh Lawton had told him that the duel followed a scene of dissipation.

Had not Kent Kingdon tasted wine since that fatal night to Horace Manners?

The Chinese now brought the warm water, and the doctor, as gently as though he were dealing with a child, probed the wound.

The man bore the pain without a word, though his face became deathly pale, and Dr. Manners asked:

"Had you not better take a glass of brandy?"

"No, sir, do not mind me, please, but go on with your work."

The physician did so, and, after giving the wounded man much pain, drew out the bullet.

"There it is, sir, and I may tell you that your wound, though serious, is not fatal."

"Thank you."

The doctor then dressed the wound, declined the invitation to remain to dinner, and telling Kent Kingdon that he would come over again in a couple of days, mounted his horse and rode away.

"Ah! that such a splendid man as he appears to be should have clouded his whole life by slaying a friend—that friend my boy."

"But I have done but my duty, and I know that my good wife will uphold me in my act."

So mused the good doctor as he wended his way homeward.

It was night when he reached Refuge Ranch, but a bright light shone from the window to welcome him, and Mabel, as lovely as a fairy, threw her arms around his neck with a greeting.

"Did you see the man who served us so well, Horace?" asked Mrs. Manning, as, with slippers and dressing-gown on, the doctor sat down in his easy-chair to await supper.

"Yes, I saw him, and he was badly wounded, though not fatally so, Ellen."

"I am glad indeed of that."

"I will have to give you pain, Ellen, my dear wife, by referring to the bitter past; but I deem it best to tell you."

"Ah, Horace! is there more ill in store for us?"

"No, I hope not; but you have heard that a young man bought the Crawford ranch and lives there?"

"Yes."

"Well, he is the one who saved our cattle from the Indians and rescued Cowboy Kit."

"Indeed!"

"I had heard that the new owner was living a secluded life there, but never knew his name until my arrival there to-day."

"Then I learned from one of his cowboys that his name was Kent Kingdon!"

"The murderer of our noble boy?" and the woman's eyes flashed fire.

"The man who killed brother Horace, papa?" said Mabel.

"The same."

"You will have him arrested and—"

"No, wife, I will do nothing of the kind."

"There was a duel fought, and in a far Eastern State, and it has been some time ago."

"The man lost his fortune and is here trying to make an honest living, and a strange accident brought him near us."

"He is a perfect recluse, calls his home Recluse Ranch, and I feel certain deeply regrets the past, while he refused to touch brandy when he needed it sorely, but let me probe his wound without a word."

"He refused to see me, when I sent in my name; but I insisted in the name of humanity and he yielded."

"I extracted the bullet, dressed his wound, and will make him several more visits to see that fever does not set in."

"I shall do my duty by him, and then the abyss between us remains as before and we go on separate ways in life."

"Ah, my noble husband, you are a man among many, and I cannot but uphold you in your humane action and say Heaven bless you."

"But did he speak of our boy?"

"No."

"He did not refer to him?"

"Indirectly he said that he had reason to know that the bullet, which was near his heart, was in a dangerous locality, and I thought that he referred to the fatal wound he gave poor Horace."

"Now let us not refer to the matter again, and I am glad to see supper is ready, for I refused dinner there, and am very hungry, I assure you," and Doctor Manners banished from his face all signs of sorrow and worry and both mother and daughter also appeared cheerful; but not one of the three could banish the remembrance of the fatal duel in which one so dear to them had been killed, and that the who one had driven the sword into his heart had found an abiding place not far from them.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

It was nearly two years after the visit of Doctor Manners to the wounded master of Recluse Ranch, that the scene which opens this story occurred.

The doctor had paid several visits to Kent Kingdon, and then had told him there was no

further need of his services, and so bade him farewell.

"Is there nothing that I can do to repay you, Doctor Manners, for your kindness to me?" asked Kingdon.

"Nothing, sir."

"You have refused pecuniary pay for your services?"

"Yes."

"And leave me under obligations to you which you will not permit me to cancel?"

"There is no obligation, sir, and I am repaid in having done my duty."

Thus they parted, and the master of the ranch became more of a recluse, it was said, than ever.

Certain it is that those at Refuge Ranch never met him in their rides, and yet, several times when the Sioux had threatened the settlement, Kent Kingdon and his cowboys had rendered valuable services.

One night there was a raid into the settlement, the red-skins striking near the ranch of Doctor Manners.

A fierce fight followed, for the Indians were ambushed by a party of horsemen, and the Sioux retreated in wild haste, leaving a large number of dead upon the field.

The firing had reached the ears of those at Refuge Ranch, and Doctor Manners and his cowboys had mounted and hastened to the scene.

But the fight was over, only the dead Indians and several cowboys held the field, and victors and vanquished were gone.

The Sioux retreated to their mountain fastnesses without doing any damage to the settlement, and the next day the news ran through the valley of their terrible defeat.

How it was that Kent Kingdon and his half-score of cowboys had whipped so severely a force five times their numbers, the settlers could not understand; but certain it was, in a fierce fight of half an hour the Indians had been beaten off, and, but for the ranchero and his men, Doctor Manners would have lost his home, and far worse, perhaps, his life and the lives of those most dear to him.

Again he wended his way to Recluse Ranch, to thank the young ranchero, for by him only had the coming of the Sioux been known.

But Kent Kingdon was absent, no one seemed to know for how long, and, after looking after the several wounded cowboys, the doctor returned home, all the information that he was able to glean from the men being that their captain, as they called the ranchero, had discovered the coming of the Indians, and, calling his cowboys together, had ambushed them.

And so time passed on, Kent Kingdon remaining close in the seclusion of his home.

Other settlers came to the Blue Valley, and the dwellers there began to grow rich and prosperous, in spite of an occasional raid of red-skins and the robberies of Overland Knights, who now and then struck a severe blow upon the community.

The practice of Dr. Manners increased, and he had begun to lay by a very handsome little fortune for his old age.

Thus matters stood when one day Mabel Manners, grown into beautiful womanhood, rode out in the afternoon, as was often her wont, and got caught in a heavy storm that swept over the country.

A splendid, plucky rider, she yet had lost control of her fright-maddened horse, and, but for Kent Kingdon's presence, she would have ended her young life then and there.

Perhaps it had been better for her had she lost her life that day in the swollen river.

The ranchero was returning from one of his rides, for he often went off for days at a time, and had taken refuge in the pine thicket to wait for the storm to blow over, when he beheld the horse and his young rider dash forward into direst peril.

The rescue, daring as it was desperate, the reader has seen, and more, he has seen Mabel Manners extend her hand to the man who saved her life, and tell him that his noble act had wiped out the cruel and bitter past.

"My poor Black Fawn is dead, for she sunk under the waters when she sprung over the bank, and never rose again," said Mabel.

"She was punished for scaring you so badly, Miss Manners; but permit me to offer you a seat behind my saddle, and escort you home—at least to your gate?"

"I accept the offer, sir, on condition that you cross our threshold and meet my parents."

"We have been indebted to you, Mr. Kingdon, for having saved our home from the flames, and our lives, too, perhaps, so you must not refuse to go with me."

"As you please, Miss Manners," was the answer, and raising her to a seat back of his saddle, he also mounted, and rode away in the direction of Refuge Ranch.

On the way there Mabel found him very entertaining, and when they reached her home he aided her to alight with the air of a courtier.

"Permit me to leave you here, Miss Manners, and to suggest that you at once change your wet clothes for dry."

"I am more than happy to have served you."

He raised his hat as he spoke, turned and sprung into his saddle and dashed away like the wind.

He had not cared to enter the house of the Mannerses while he was under a cloud, whose shadow fell upon his heart, try as he might to banish it.

CHAPTER IX.

A FATEFUL MEETING.

"WIFE, have you it in your soul to forgive that man?"

So had asked Doctor Manners as the two had sat together that night in the pleasant sitting-room at Refuge Ranch.

The man he referred to was Kent Kingdon.

The father and mother had heard Mabel's story, had heard what she had said to him, and knew how he had dashed away without crossing their threshold.

They owed to him their daughter's life.

They owed it him on more than one occasion that their home had not been burned and themselves killed or carried into captivity, and all their savings wiped out, their cattle and horses driven off, all in a night's time.

But they owed it too to Kent Kingdon that their loved boy had died on the very entrance to a noble manhood.

Could the good deeds done by the ranchero blot out the one deed that had fallen so heavily upon their hearts?

Doctor Manners had given Mabel a strong, hot drink and sent her to bed after her return, and so the two, husband and wife, sat together talking over the story which their daughter had told.

In answer to the doctor's question, Mrs. Manners dropped her head in her hands.

She was still young, scarcely over forty, and yet there were gray hairs upon her temples, called there by deepest sorrow.

Could she forgive the man who had killed her boy?

Could the fact that he had saved the life of Mabel wipe out the past?

It was not a question to answer quickly, and so she thought over it.

He had shunned them, she knew.

He had seemed to feel deeply, the doctor had said, and remorse must gnaw at his heart.

Still she remembered the story, as truthfully told by her husband, that their son gave the provocation.

Horace Manners was not altogether blameless, they knew.

Still he lay in his grave and Kent Kingdon had put him there.

The two hoped and believed that the Recluse Ranchero had repented of his deed over and over again.

Of his fugitive life, since he had fled the night of the fatal duel, they knew nothing.

They did not know that he was called Don, the Card King.

They did not know that his long, lonely pilgrimages were to the mining-camps, and wild border towns, to meet kindred spirits around the gaming board.

They only knew that he had hidden there in their midst, and seemed to be a man who wished to atone for the past.

At last Mrs. Manners had decided, and she raised her head from her hands.

Her face was pale, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

"Horace, I forgive him, as I hope to be forgiven hereafter for any sin that I have committed."

"Ask him to come to us; but oh! do not ask me to grasp his hand in welcome, the hand that drove the sword into the heart of my darling son, and took from him his life."

"Yes, ask him to come to us, for he has proven himself our friend."

The next day Doctor Manners rode to the Recluse Ranch on his mission of peace-making.

He was met by Kent Kingdon as he dismounted from his horse, and the latter said:

"Doctor Manners, I feel that because I was

so fortunate yesterday, as to save the life of your daughter, you deem it your duty to come here to see me."

"Pray do not thank me, but feel that my act has been my own recompense."

"Mr. Kingdon, I am glad to come here, glad to tell you that though you took from us one child, you restored another to us, and both my wife and myself beg that the past shall be buried between us and that you return with me to my home that she may thank you from the fullness of her heart."

"Will not her very thanks remind her of the curses that she must have heaped upon my head?"

"No, for she has never cursed you."

"Bitterly has she grieved, yes, as I have, and Mabel has; but we held not hatred in our hearts."

"Come with me, Mr. Kingdon."

"Not to-day, Doctor Manners; but some day soon I will come, and I will meet you all, as I wish to do; but not now, not to-day."

Doctor Manners did not urge it; but he showed that he was sincere by remaining to dinner at the ranch, and a good dinner it was, for Wing-Wing, the Chinese cook fairly excelled himself in honor of the guest.

Several days after Kent Kingdon rode up to the Refuge Ranch, and he was met by Doctor Manners, who ushered him into the pleasant sitting-room, made trebly comfortable and inviting through the taste and work of Mabel.

A few moments after Mabel glided in, and with only the slightest hesitation said, as she extended her hand:

"I am glad to have the opportunity, Mr. Kingdon, to offer you my thanks again, and to tell you how deep is my gratitude for the life you saved."

"Pray do not refer to it, Miss Manners, for I did only that which any man would do."

"I trust you have suffered no ill effects from your adventure?"

"None, I assure you; but let me present my mother, Mr. Kingdon."

Mrs. Manners had glided noiselessly into the room, unseen by her husband, who was gazing out of the window, while his thoughts were far away.

Perhaps they were upon the grave of his son in the New England churchyard, and how strange it was that he had just welcomed to his home the slayer of that son.

At least, whatever his thoughts, he did not see his wife enter, and so Mabel presented her.

The mother was pale, very pale; but calm.

She halted, hesitated, and for an instant it seemed that she would break down.

She was face to face with the man whom she had called a murderer.

Face to face with the man who had slain her first-born.

The ghost of that son seemed to rise up before her with reproach.

But the daughter he had saved was there, present with her.

One glance into the beautiful face of that daughter, and she said in a low, firm voice:

"Mr. Kingdon, I am glad to welcome you to Refuge Ranch, that I may tell you how a mother's heart is full of gratitude to you for saving the life of her child."

The words were strange ones, for they almost summoned up the specter of Horace Manners from the grave.

But they were spoken earnestly, and the woman meant them.

At the moment of their utterance she would have grasped his hand had he held it out.

But he did not. He was perfectly cool, but subdued in manner, and he bent low before the one upon whose head his act had fallen with terrific weight.

He bent low, almost as one might bow before an altar, and then replied:

"You can feel no more joy in your daughter's escape from death, Mrs. Manners, than do I joy in having been the humble means of saving her."

"But what a pleasant home you have here, not at all like a border home within," and he gazed about him admiringly, having quickly turned the subject.

"My husband says that you also have a pleasant home, sir," said Mrs. Manners.

"Yes, I like it, madam, and my Chinese servants, for I have two, brothers by the name of Wing-Wing and Ding-Ding, keep it as neat as a pin."

Thus did Kent Kingdon skillfully turn the conversation from any more thanks, or reference to aught that might conjure up the past, and, after half an hour's visit he took his departure, promising to call again at an early day.

CHAPTER X.

A HEART IN BONDAGE.

TRUE to his word, Kent Kingdon did call again at Refuge Ranch.

And he called again and again.

Ever dignified, yet a brilliant conversationalist, with a fund of story and anecdote, he was a man to fascinate those with whom he came in contact.

He sung well, played a good game of chess and whist, while he was noted for his nerve and skill with firearms and as a horseman.

His courage had been put to the test time and again, and it was not a wonder that with such a man often with her, and owing to him her life, that Mabel Manners lost her heart.

There was a certain mysterious fascination about the man which added to her love for him.

He visited no other family than that of Doctor Manners, and seemed still the recluse that he had been called.

His visits at first gave no alarm to the watchful doctor and his wife; but at length they began to fear that Mabel was becoming very deeply interested in the man.

She was very young, and he was dangerous company for one of her loving and impulsive nature.

They received him in their home, yes, under existing circumstances, and he had won their regard and respect; but then he could never be more to them.

The grave between them must ever be a barrier to Mabel's loving him.

So they thought, but they were wrong.

The young girl was becoming daily and hourly more interested in the handsome man.

She knew not his character.

His life in the mining-camps, as Don the Card King, was unknown to her, and no one suspected him of being other than he appeared to be.

He had a pleasant home, money, and was a courtly gentleman, educated and brilliant.

He was a man who could lead a desperate charge, was as brave as a lion, and ever ready to stand between danger and his friends.

She knew him only as she saw him.

What he had been was an unread book, save that he had been a little wild at college, and had taken her brother's life.

Viewed from the standpoint of her love for the man, she began to even condone his duel with Horace Manners, considering that her brother had been the offender.

It was pitiful to see how the man thus gained an influence over her, warping her views to his own way of thinking.

He loved her in return, yes.

Perhaps the very thought that there was a barrier between them quickened that love.

He was determined, too, to make her his wife.

He would allow no obstacle to bar his way, and he set about his plans with deliberation and tact.

One day Doctor Manners said to his daughter: "Mabel, don't you think Captain Kingdon visits us too often?"

He was called captain, as the cowboys had organized a company of Rangers and made him their leader.

"I do not know father."

"What do you think?" was the reply.

"I do think so."

"And mother?"

"Thinks as I do."

"You don't like him then, sir?"

"Yes, but under circumstances as they are, I do not feel that he can ever be any nearer to us than he is."

"I do not understand you, father!"

"Well, my child, I have seen of late that his visits are to you."

"To me, father?"

"Yes, Mabel, and I fear you are becoming interested in him, and so speak to save you pain, as, with no objection whatever to Captain Kingdon himself, of course he can never be more to you than an acquaintance, a friend if you will."

"You refer to his having killed brother Horace?"

"Yes, that is a barrier which love even cannot pass."

Mabel sighed, but said nothing, and Doctor Manners, feeling that he had done his duty in giving his daughter a warning, said no more then upon the subject.

To his surprise, and pleasure, however, the frequent visits of Kent Kingdon ceased.

He still came, but it was generally when he felt sure of seeing the whole family, and he seemed not to care to be alone with Mabel.

One day the doctor said:

"My child, did you speak to Kingdon about what I said?"

"In regard to his coming so often?"

"Yes."

"I did, sir."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Frankly that I did not care to have him give you and mother pain by his frequent visits to me."

"He took it kindly?"

"So it seems, sir."

"I am glad, and now all will be well; but both your mother and myself dreaded that you had learned to love Kingdon."

To this Mabel made no reply, and again the subject was dropped.

But some weeks after, as Doctor Manners was coming home from a visit to a patient one pleasant afternoon, he heard a horse neigh.

The sound came from a valley not far distant, and he rode there cautiously, wondering who could be on that part of his ranch, as it was not on the main country highway, or a trail.

He reached the top of a hill, and glancing down into the vale beheld a scene that drove the color from his face.

There, seated on a log, were two persons, one of them his daughter, the other Kent Kingdon.

The man's arm was about the waist of Mabel, and her head rested lovingly upon his shoulder. Not far distant stood their horses awaiting them.

Doctor Manners always went armed, with revolver and rifle, and he half-raised the latter under a sudden impulse to kill the man.

But he checked himself and muttered:

"No, no, I have only that act of his in killing my boy against him."

"He is all that I could wish otherwise; but that can never be gotten over."

"My God! that it should have come to this!"

For a moment he stood in silent and pained meditation, and then he turned away and rode homeward.

Arriving at home he told his wife what he had seen, and added:

"Now, wife, we will leave here at once."

"I have saved up, as you know, considerable money, and we will go to St. Louis and live, for I can soon build up a practice there among my numerous friends."

"Our place can be sold for a good price with all on it, and we can thus get Mabel away from all temptation before it is too late."

"Besides, my wife, I have long wished to get you and Mabel out of this wild country, and thank Heaven I have the means to do so now."

"Will you begin to get ready at once?"

"Gladly," and the mother's eyes filled with tears, and her heart sunk within her at the thought that her daughter's heart was in bondage to a man she could never wed.

At sunset Mabel returned home, and at supper she said in an indifferent tone:

"Papa, I met Captain Kingdon this afternoon, and he starts on a trip with the Rangers against the Indians, having had a call from the commander of the fort to do so, and he will be gone several weeks he says."

The doctor glanced at his wife meaningly and said:

"Then we will not be able to say good-by to him, for I have determined to start East within the week, my child."

They saw Mabel start and turn pale; but she asked as calmly as she could:

"Do you mean to give up Refuge Ranch, father?"

"Yes, and I shall make my home in an Eastern city, my child, so you must get all ready to go within the next few days."

Both father and mother saw the look of worry that came over the face of their daughter, and soon after Mabel went to her room; but they heard her pacing to and fro for a long time after they had retired for the night.

The next morning however she was calm, and put on an air of cheerfulness which she did not feel, and set to work to help her mother pack up.

A week after Doctor Manners, his wife, daughter and the old servants, started in an ambulance for the nearest station, distance forty miles from Refuge Ranch, and their home was left in the care of their head stockman to be sold.

CHAPTER XI.

TRACKED.

THE captain of the Cowboy Rangers, Kent Kingdon, went upon his raid against the Sioux, supporting a company of United States cavalry which had been sent out from the fort, and the expedition lasted for several weeks.

Not only had the Sioux been getting very troublesome, but there was a road-agent band infesting the Overland Stage Trails, and also making raids upon settlers, and the mining-camps, who had become very bold in their depredations.

They were known as the "Overland Owls," and their plan was never to rob, or hold up a stage-coach except by night.

They wore masks, which had the appearance of an owl's face, for they were made of feathers.

Who they were no one knew, and where their retreat was had never been found out.

They would strike the Overland Trail, for a distance of over a hundred miles, and places further apart than that would be robbed by them the same night.

Upon these robbers, the Overland Owls, Captain Kingdon had also received orders to strike whenever he got an opportunity to do so, and the settlers for many miles around were ever ready to give him a helping hand.

The expedition against the Sioux had been a successful one, and Captain Kingdon's Cowboy Rangers were complimented by the army officer in command for their gallant services.

On the way back to the settlement he had decided to make a move against the Overland Owls, and taking only his own men, he went in search of the robbers, and upon his return the settlers were rejoiced to learn that he had captured and hanged four of them.

The way of the Cowboy Rangers upon their return, lay near Refuge Ranch, and leaving his men to continue on home without him, Kent Kingdon decided to ride by and see the doctor's family, in spite of his looking rather seedy after his long hunt in the mountains.

He fairly started with amazement when he saw that the cabin was completely closed up, and there was no sign of life about the place.

He saw a cowboy coming out of a cabin not far distant, and spurred his tired horse toward him.

"Why, Clay, where are the people?" he cried.

"Doctor Manners got word, cap'n, that called him East, and so they all went, bag and baggage, and left the place to be sold."

"They left good-by for you, sir."

A curse came through the shut teeth of Kingdon.

"Where have they gone?" he asked, in a hoarse voice.

"I don't know, sir."

Without a word Kingdon wheeled his horse and rode away.

He went back on the main trail for a short distance, turned into a side path, and soon drew rein at the log where Dr. Manners had seen Mabel seated with him.

Dismounting, he glanced into one end of the log and drew out a letter.

He broke it open and hastily read a few lines, and then said, in a voice that was hoarse with suppressed feeling:

"By heaven! but I shall follow her there."

"She shall not escape me."

Springing upon his horse he rode rapidly on toward his home.

Night came on, and with it a drizzling rain, but he did not seem to notice it, and held on his way.

Three days after he left Recluse Ranch alone, and took the trail leading toward the stage station on the Overland.

Leaving his horse at the station, he the next day took passage on the stage for the East.

In the mean time Doctor Manners and his family had reached St. Louis, a pleasant house had been rented and the physician hung out his sign as a practicing M. D.

The doctor had been originally from St. Louis, so had many friends there, and he felt assured of a good practice.

It was not very long before friends called, and once seen, Mabel Manners became a belle in society, ere she had been two months in the city.

Her father was anxious to have her receive attention and mingle in society, and had worked to this end, hoping that she would be made to forget Kent Kingdon.

But Mabel was true in her love, and though she appeared happy her thoughts often turned to Refuge Ranch and the handsome captain of the Cowboy Rangers.

One day, as she was riding on horseback in the Park, attended by a young admirer, she suddenly beheld a horseman coming toward her.

"See how that fellow sits in his saddle, Miss Manners?" said her escort.

Her eyes were already upon him.

But one man had she ever seen ride as that horseman did.

But one such form did she know, and only one such face was there in the world to her.

She turned very pale, and then her face crimsoned up quickly.

She saw that it was Kent Kingdon, and he had been for weeks in the town looking for an opportunity to see her alone.

As no chance had offered, he was now determined to address her, and he raised his hat as he rode forward and said:

"Why, Miss Mabel, how glad I am to see you."

"What an unexpected pleasure."

She grasped his hand, and yet she knew that he had come there to seek her.

"My friend, Captain Kingdon, Mr. Preble," she said, introducing the two, and she added:

"Captain Kingdon is an old frontier friend of ours, and I did not know he was in the city."

"With your permission will not the captain join us?" asked Preble politely, though he hoped that he would refuse.

"Thank you, no; but I ride every afternoon in the Park at this time, and this is a favorite place with me, the view is so fine, so I shall see you again, Miss Mabel."

She understood his words perfectly, that he meant for her to come there the next afternoon alone.

Then, after a few words more they parted, Preble remarking:

"What a splendid fellow your friend is, Miss Manners."

"Now, he is the kind of man I should think the very one to win a woman's heart."

"You can never judge of a woman's heart, Mr. Preble," replied Mabel, and they continued their ride.

But Mabel was *distracted* all the afternoon, and was glad to get home again.

She did not ask her escort in, for she dared not do so.

But the next day she went alone to the Park, though she knew that she should have had an escort.

But she must see Kent Kingdon, and wonder why he had come to St. Louis.

She rode to the spot where she had met him the afternoon before, and there she saw him awaiting her.

CHAPTER XII.

IN FETTERS.

"MABEL, my loved one, you see that I have followed you."

Kent Kingdon spoke the words in a low, earnest tone, as he grasped her hand.

"I see that you have, Kent; but, oh! why did you do so?"

"Do you think I will give you up?"

They were riding along side by side now, and for a moment she made no reply.

Then she said:

"You received the letter that I left for you in the log post-office?" and she smiled at the remembrance of what they had called their post-office, for many a note had been left there before, many a time had it been a trysting-place.

"Yes, and that is why I am here."

"I told you not to come after me."

"True, and yet told me where you were going to live."

"Did I?"

"Yes, and I had some trouble in finding you, and it took me weeks before I did do so, and then much longer to get a chance to see you alone."

"Often I have seen you with others; but I would not then speak to you."

"Yesterday I grew desperate and so boldly met you face to face."

"And why have you come here, Kent?"

"Do you not know?"

"No."

"Can you not guess?"

"I told you not to come."

"I know it."

"I told you that though I loved you dearer than all else, that it was best for us to part forever."

"Nonsense."

"It is best, Kent."

"No, you must become my wife."

"Ah, no, Kent."

"You must."

"Why do you not help me to do right, Kent?"

"Is it doing wrong in your becoming my wife?"

"Father and mother, yes, and the world think so."

"You mean because I killed poor Horace in a duel?"

"Yes."

"Let the dead past bury its dead, Mabel."

"Alas! it cannot be."

"I know that your father came here to get you away from me."

"I know that also."

"I know that he believed that with you in St. Louis, I would not dare follow you, and that you would forget me."

"He does not know me, Kent, to think that."

"Nor me, if he thought I would give you up."

"But I am here, Mabel, and I have come to make you my wife."

"Your father does not dislike me, nor does your mother; it is only the thought that there is a grave between us that keeps us apart."

"Would a mother give up her son because he had slain his father, or brother?"

"Why should I be given up because, acting in self-defense, I killed your brother?"

"No, that specter of the past shall not come between us."

"It has not kept you from loving me, it shall not keep you from becoming my wife," he said vehemently.

The girl loved him, and his reasoning was logically true to her.

She saw all through his eyes only, and she said:

"Well, Kent, come and ask father."

"He would refuse."

"Then what can we do?"

"Become my wife secretly, and then let me write your father a letter, telling him all, and letting him know that I will come the next day to see him."

"He will be very angry, Kent, and for all father's quiet manner, he is terrible when aroused."

"That is why I write to him, Mabel, and give his anger time to cool before I see him, for I care not to be insulted, even by your father."

"We love each other, and that is all there is of it, and we do not deserve abuse because it happens that in the past I killed your brother."

"We will go back to the far West to live, to my home, or I will buy Refuge Ranch of your father, and we will be happy there, for we can take back with us many things to add to our comfort."

"Will you be my wife, Mabel?"

"Yes."

"Secretly marrying me?"

"Yes, Kent."

"When, Mabel?"

"Whenever you say."

"Then three days from this walk out alone in the afternoon."

"Come to the Planter's House and ask to be shown to room thirteen."

"I will be there and have a clergyman and witness with me to receive you."

"After the ceremony you can return at once home and I will write to your father, telling him all."

"Are you satisfied, Mabel?"

"I am."

"And trust me?"

"In everything," was the low response.

Then they turned homeward, and Kent Kingdon, when no one was near to see him leave her, bade her farewell and she rode on alone to the city.

The man returned by another street, a strange look upon his face, a look that it had been well had Mabel seen it, for it might have opened her eyes to the fact that Kent Kingdon masked his feelings when with her.

But she only believed in his love for her and could think no other than a like sincere affection for her prompted him.

She was young, innocent, and he had saved her life, while he was a man to win hearts and turn heads far older than hers, and more experienced in the world's wiles.

The next day she kept her promise and went to room thirteen in the Planter's Hotel.

When she left that room half an hour after she was the wife of Kent Kingdon.

She had bound herself heart and body in fetters which it was no easy task to break.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIRST BLOW.

BACK to the far frontier the scene changed, and once again the reader is invited to Refuge Manor.

Its doors and windows have been thrown open, and it presents certainly a most inviting look.

A wagon-train had reached there a week before, bearing many things to add to the comfort of the dwellers at Refuge Ranch.

And those dwellers were Captain Kent Kingdon and his beautiful wife.

It had all come about so strangely.

Kent Kingdon had recently married Mabel Manners, and then had, as he had said he would, written the letter to her father.

Doctor Manners had been almost overpowered when he read the letter, which told him that his only child, his beautiful daughter, was the wife of the man who had slain her brother.

He found it hard to believe, and for a long while struggled with anger and despair.

Then he read the letter over again, from beginning to end.

It was a manly letter to read.

It told how the writer regretted the past, and how he had suffered with remorse for the grave he had made.

It told how he had risked his life to save Mabel from death, and thus atone in part for his deed.

How he had tried hard to efface the past and win the regard of the parents of the maiden he had loved since the day he had dragged Mabel from the water.

He said he was not responsible for loving one so pure and beautiful, and when he saw that Mabel loved him, then he had acted from impulse and told his love for her.

He told Doctor Manners that he had tried hard to remain out West, after his departure, but that he was forced to follow him, and that he had urged a secret marriage hoping, after the step had been taken, they, Mabel and himself, would be forgiven for what they had done.

So read the letter, and at last Doctor Manners took it to his wife.

For hours they talked together over it, and then decided to let matters take their course.

Mabel was sent for, and her father told her that he would utter no word of reproach, and that all he asked was that they should be married over again in his home.

Then he sent for Kent Kingdon, and the man was received in a quiet manner and told what was expected of him.

He at once agreed to the marriage ceremony being performed over again, and a few days after, several old friends were invited to the doctor's house, and thus Mabel was publicly the wife of Kent Kingdon, none of those who looked on, excepting the four who held the dark secret, suspecting that a mystery lay at the bottom of this strange marriage.

Soon after the couple started for the frontier home, Refuge Ranch having been given to Mabel by her father as a bridal present.

They carried with them all that was necessary to their comfort, and thus it was that the old home put on such a gala look.

The two Chinese servants were sent over from Recluse Ranch, and Mabel settled down into married life with every hope of happiness in the future.

And yet, at times the form of her dead brother would rise before her, and she would wonder if she had not done wrong in marrying the one who had taken his life.

But she banished such thoughts as well as she could, and devoted herself to the duties devolving upon her.

She was sorry that her husband was so often called away from home; but then he said that his duties demanded it, and she had to rest content.

He had his own, and Refuge Ranch to look after, and there were a number of cattle on both that had to have constant care.

Then he was Captain of the Cowboy Rangers, and there was plenty to call him away and keep his time occupied.

One day, while seated upon the broad piazza which ran across the front of the substantial cabin, Mabel saw a horseman approaching at a gallop.

At first she thought it was her husband, who had been absent for two days, but a second glance showed her that she was mistaken.

The man was a cowboy, from appearances, and his horse showed that he had ridden hard.

He dashed up to the door and called out, as he touched his hat:

"Is the cap'n home, miss?"

"No, he has been away two days."

"When's he coming?"

"I do not exactly know."

"Well, I've got an important letter for him."

"Who is it from?"

"The lieutenant."

"I will give it to him when he returns."

"He'd better come quick, or he'll miss the best snap of his life."

"Are you his wife I has heard was so beautiful?"

"I am his wife," said Mabel, with a smile.

"Waal, you is beautiful, and no mistake," said the man, earnestly, and yet politely.

Mabel blushed at the praise, and said:

"I will give the letter to my husband when he returns, if you will trust it to me."

"I guess so, for you bein' the cap'n's wife, knows all he's up to, I guesses."

"Here it are, miss, and if you knows whar to reach him, you had better send for him, for I has to keep on along the line, soon as I changes my horse."

The man handed over to Mabel a letter and then rode to the rear of the cabin.

In a short while she saw him dash away on a fresh horse, taken from the corral, and she wondered at his doing so without permission.

"Wing-Wing, who was that man?" she asked of the Chinese house-servant.

"He courier manee of captee."

"A courier?"

"Yes."

"Then his taking a horse was all right?"

"Yes, allee lightee."

Then Mabel turned to the letter which the man had left.

Doubtless in the haste of sending it, the sender had forgotten to seal the envelope, for it was unsealed.

Not thinking that it could be a matter which her husband wished to keep from her, she took the letter from the envelope.

She glanced at its contents, her face paled, she attempted to rise and, with a moan, sunk down upon the floor in a swoon.

She had received her first blow, and a cruel fate was upon her track, for that letter had revealed a strange secret to her.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COURIER'S FATE.

A FEW moments only had Mabel been in a swoon, when the clatter of hoofs was heard without, and a horseman dashed up and gave a shrill whistle.

Wing-Wing heard it and ran out and took his horse.

It was Kent Kingdon, and horse and rider showed that they had traveled far and fast.

"Where is my wife?" asked Kingdon.

"Allee lightee in house," was the reply, and the Chinese led the horse away.

"Where can Mabel be that she does not meet me?" muttered Kingdon, as he entered the wide hallway.

Then he started, for through the open door, leading into the sitting-room, he saw his wife's form upon the floor.

He sprang toward her, and raised her in his arms.

"What in Satan's name has happened, I wonder, for she has fainted?" he said, almost gruffly.

Then he placed her upon a lounge, and for the first time caught sight of the letter.

He sprang forward and picked it up, hastily glancing at the contents.

A fearful oath came from his lips as he read it, and his face turned pale, while he gnashed his teeth like a madman.

"Curses! a thousand curses upon the fool who has made this blunder!" he hissed.

Shoving the letter hastily into his pocket, he turned to his wife.

Her eyes were open, and they were fixed upon him with a look of horror.

"Mabel, my poor Mabel, you have seen that decoy letter, and believe it true."

"My poor child, let me tell you that it was written for a purpose, to insnare one who has long been suspected of certain red work, and you have believed that it was meant for me, and was true."

"Are you telling me the truth, Kent Kingdon?"

"Why should I deceive you, my beautiful wife?"

"It was addressed to you?"

"A mistake in the sender, who put a note to me in the envelope intended for another, and vice versa."

"It was a foolish blunder, and will destroy our plan to catch a settler whom we have long suspected of being a traitor."

"Oh, Kent, forgive me!" and springing to her feet she threw herself into his arms.

"I have nothing to forgive, my child, for I do not wonder that you suspected me, when the letter came addressed to me here."

"Who brought it?"

"A man who said he was your courier."

"Ah, yes, a man with red beard and hair?"

"Yes."

"And whither did he go?"

"He changed his horse for one from the corral, and went to the stage-station, he said."

"Yes, so he will be back to-morrow, and I will write to the man who sent this letter, telling him of his awful blunder."

"You see, Mabel, the Overland Owls have been giving us so much trouble of late, that I have men stationed along the line of road with orders to send me news of all that turns up."

"My lieutenant, of the Cowboy Rangers, is at the other end of the line, and we arranged a plan to catch a settler who is a traitor, and he was to send that note to him, and another to me telling me he had written the supposed traitor."

"The result is he has spoiled all by his blunder, and I fear the man may escape, so I will go to his ranch and arrest him."

"How long ago was the courier here?"

"At one o'clock."

"And it is now nearly two."

"I will go at once and return at soon as I can."

So saying Kent Kingdon left the cabin, after affectionately kissing Mabel and bidding her not to worry.

He ordered Ding-Ding to fetch his fleetest horse, and ten minutes after was speeding along like the wind on the track taken by the cowboy courier who had given the letter to Mabel.

His face wore an angry look, and he kept pressing the spurs into the flanks of his horse, allowing him no slackening of his speed up-hill or down.

The pace was a tremendous one, for the animal was as fleet as the wind, and after an hour's run Kingdon looked at his watch.

"I have been going two miles to his one, I am sure."

"He cannot be far ahead, though he is a hard rider," he said.

In ten minutes more he came to the brow of a hill, and half a mile ahead, going at a gallop along the trail, he saw a horseman.

"It's my man," he grinly said, and the spurs again sunk into the flanks of the noble animal.

After a short while longer he hailed.

His voice rung out like a bugle, the man heard it, turned quickly in his saddle and then came to a halt just as he was entering a clump of timber.

"Ah, cap'n, you've rid hard to overtake me."

"Is anything wrong, sir?" asked the man, as Kingdon rode up to him.

"Yes."

"What are it, cap'n?"

"You hand me your weapons, Red Larry, for I want them."

The man obeyed without a word, but he seemed frightened, as he gazed into the face of Kingdon.

"Is you mad with me, cap'n?"

"I am!"

"What has I done?"

"You gave a letter to my wife, and she read it."

"Lordy! that was woman's curiosity."

"It was your bungling, and Danner's too, for the letter was not sealed, and under no circumstances should you have given it to her."

"She's your wife."

"And for that reason you should not have let her see it."

"I had to go on with word to the other end of the line, so could not wait."

"You should have done so, and, as you did not, I shall kill you."

"Kill me, cap'n?" and the man smiled incredulously.

"Yes, so dismount from your horse."

"Oh, cap'n!"

"Do you hear?"

The man was still holding belief that Kingdon was not in earnest.

But he obeyed and dismounted.

"Have you other letters with you?"

"One, sir, for the west end of the line."

"Give it to me."

The letter was taken from his pocket and handed over.

"This is all?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"What news have you?"

"No more than the lieutenant wrote, and it's a big snap, sir."

"Red Larry, you are a fool, and, as such are not to be trusted."

"Lordy, cap'n, I didn't know I was doing any wrong."

"Then you prove yourself a fool."

"You cannot be trusted as a courier, and of

course, I cannot let you go free, so I shall kill you."

"Does you mean it, cap'n?"

"I am not one to joke, Red Larry."

"Ah, cap'n, don't kill me."

"See, sir, my hands is up!" and the man, now thoroughly frightened at the face of Kingdon, which was almost demoniacal in its rage, raised his hands above his head and dropped upon his knees.

Kingdon had already drawn his revolver and stepped back three paces, while the kneeling wretch still held his hands above his head appealing for mercy.

"Red Larry, you have got but one moment to live," said Kent Kingdon, hoarsely, and he leveled his revolver at the kneeling wretch.

"Mercy, cap'n! mer—"

But the cry was drowned in the crack of the revolver, and Red Larry fell forward upon his face, a bullet in his brain.

With a grim smile Kent Kingdon regarded his victim for a minute, and then mounting his horse he rode back homeward, leaving the body lying where it had fallen, to become food for wolves, and the man's horse feeding near.

"They will find it, and set it down as the work of the Overland Owls," he said, as he retraced his steps over the trail that led to Refuge Ranch.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECOND BLOW.

ALTHOUGH Kent Kingdon returned to Refuge Ranch, he did not remain very long.

He was glad to see that Mabel had believed the story he had told her, and he said:

"I rode after the courier, Mabel, to get him to return with me and explain to you that the letter was intended for another."

"There was no need of that, my dear husband, for I believed all that you told me."

"But, oh! it was such a shock at first."

"I do not wonder at it; but I did not overtake the man, and I fear there is trouble in his path."

"What trouble, Kent, can there be?"

"Well, I met a settler who told me that he had seen a party of horsemen on that trail this morning, that he was certain were Overland Owls."

"Oh, Kent! that fearful band of men?"

"So he believed them, and, as I cared not to run into an ambush, and thus make a beautiful widow of you, I returned; but I fear that the courier might have run upon them."

"I hope not, poor fellow; but what can the Overland Owls be doing in this neighborhood by day?"

"Doubtless in hiding for some red deed to be done under cover of the night, so I will go and call my Rangers together and thwart their game."

"If I find them, Mabel, I may be gone for a day or so, but, if not, will return in the morning."

"Good-by, my sweet wife," and Kent Kingdon mounted a fresh horse once more and rode away, leaving Mabel gazing wistfully after him.

"Oh, what a life of danger he leads, and he is so often away from home!"

"I wish he would be willing to give up this wild life on the border, and go East to live."

"We could be so very happy there," and tears came into the beautiful eyes of the young wife.

She heard regularly from her parents, and had written them how happy she was, and felt that it would give them joy to know that all of her brightest anticipations had been realized.

And yet Mabel was not happy.

She tried to make herself believe that she was; but the grim specter of her brother would not down, and she began to feel that the saving of her life by Kent Kingdon had not wholly atoned for his having killed her brother.

When Kent Kingdon left the ranch, he took a trail leading to the right.

He was lost in thought, or he would have seen a horseman suddenly rein back out of the trail as he caught sight of him.

He rode on and, still in deep meditation, passed the spot where the horseman had left the trail, and he failed to see the forms of steed and rider half-hidden in a thicket.

When he had passed on, the one in hiding gave a deep sigh of relief.

"That was he!"

"I never could mistake him for another."

"How glad I am that he did not see me, for then the end would have come sooner than I wished."

So said the one who had ridden out of the trail at sight of Kent Kingdon.

When the latter had disappeared in the distance, the one in the thicket again rode out into the trail and headed his horse toward Refuge Ranch.

He appeared to be a mere boy in years, and his form was slight but elegant.

He rode a wiry little Indian pony, was armed with a pair of revolvers, wore a corduroy suit, the pants stuck in top-boots, and a slouch hat shaded his face.

Having seen Kent Kingdon disappear in the distance he continued on his way, and soon came in sight of Refuge Ranch.

He rode up to the cabin slowly, while he muttered:

"Yes, this is his house as it was described to me."

"A fine place surely, and he is doubtless a great man in these parts."

"Now to see the fair young wife who I am told is mistress of Refuge Ranch."

"Ha! ha! ha! the place is no longer a place of refuge for him, for I have tracked him to his retreat, though it has taken long to do so."

As he halted before the door Mabel came out upon the piazza.

She had seen his approach, noticed that he was not one of the neighbors, but a stranger, and his youthful face had attracted her.

He doffed his hat politely at sight of her and then said:

"Is this Refuge Ranch, miss?"

"Yes, sir," and Mabel gazed with considerable interest upon the handsome young horseman.

"May I ask if Captain Kingdon is at home?"

"No, he has but a short while departed, I regret to say."

"Will he be long away?"

"Until to-morrow, perhaps longer; but will you not dismount and rest yourself?"

"Thank you, miss," and the young man gave his bridle-rein to the Chinese who just then came around the corner of the cabin.

"Is the wife of Captain Kingdon at home, miss?" he asked, as he stepped upon the piazza.

"Yes, I am Mrs. Kingdon."

"You! pardon me, but I supposed you were a young girl, you at least look so."

"Still I am Mrs. Kingdon."

"Then my business is with you, and it is a sad business too as you will discover," was the response, and there was that in the tone and look of the strange visitor that caused Mabel to feel as though an icy hand had clutched her heart.

"What have you to say to me?" almost gasped Mabel, dreading she knew not what.

"That which will make you hate Kent Kingdon with your whole soul," was the cold and pitiless reply.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SURGEON SCOUT.

SOME little time before the scene related in the foregoing chapter, a horseman was riding over a prairie.

Before him lay a clump of timber, upon a little hill, and he was going toward it, as though he intended to seek shelter there for the night, for it was not long before sunset.

The horseman was a fine specimen of manhood, tall, well-formed and with a face that was full of power and courage.

He was dressed in the uniform of an army officer, and wore a slouch hat with a gold cord about it, while his hair fell in waves upon his broad shoulders.

Though an officer he carried a repeating rifle at his back, and a belt of arms, but no sword.

His horse was a powerful animal, large and long-bodied, and though tired seemed to move with a light and springy step.

As he neared the timber he peered into its depths, with the manner of a man who felt danger might lurk there.

But he saw no one, and said aloud: "We will pass the night here, Rocks, and go on to the fort to-morrow."

Hardly had he entered the timber when an arrow cut through his coat, almost grazing his side.

In an instant his revolver was drawn, and he spurred forward to confront his foe.

But the weapon was not discharged, though but for a searching glance it would have been.

There, lying upon the ground was an Indian.

He wore the full head-dress of a chief, and had thrown away his bow and grasped a knife, for he had fired his last arrow at his pale-face foe as he rode upon him.

"Let the pale-face come on, for the Sioux chief knows no fear."

"Red Dog will fight him."

The officer heard the words, and understanding the Sioux tongue perfectly, he dismounted and walked quietly toward the Indian, who half raised up to meet him, as though expecting an attack.

"Let the Red Dog know that I am not one to kill a wounded man, be he red-skin or pale-face."

"The Red Dog is wounded and I am a medicine man of the pale-faces, so will care for his wound."

"The Red Dog knows the White Beaver,* the medicine-chief of the fort, and he is a mighty warrior, for he has sent many of my braves to the happy hunting-grounds."

"But the Red Dog is ready to die."

"You need not die, at least not now."

"Let me look at your wound."

"The White Beaver is good to the Sioux chief, if his words are straight."

"I am telling you the truth, Red Dog, and I will help you now, if I kill you the first time I meet you on the war-path again."

"Come, drop that knife and let us be friends, at least for the present."

The Indian at once put down his knife, for there was that in the face of the army surgeon that he read aright, as meaning to do him only a service.

"You have been in battle with the soldiers, chief?" he asserted.

Red Dog nodded.

"When?"

"Three days ago."

"Well, your leg is broken by a pistol-bullet."

"Yes."

"It is a bad wound, but as I have my surgical-case with me I can mend you up all right."

"Where are your warriors?"

"Gone back to the village of my people."

"The soldiers whipped you?"

The Sioux nodded.

"Why were you deserted by your braves?"

"My horse fell, and I was shot, while the pale-faces passed over me."

"See!"

He showed cuts and bruises as he spoke, evidently made by the hoofs of horses.

"Well, chief?"

"It was night, and I was not seen."

"My pony was near and came at my call, so I dragged myself upon his back and came here to hide."

"My pony is yonder by the spring."

"I will carry you there, and then get to work."

As the officer spoke he raised the red-skin in his arms, and bore him through the timber without an effort, it seemed.

Then he got out his case of instruments, and set to work dressing the wounded leg, the red-skin uttering no outcry of pain in spite of the agony he endured.

A camp-fire was then built, supper was cooked by the surgeon, and the chief ate with an appetite that showed how nearly starved he was.

The horse of the scout and the chief's pony were then staked out for the night, and the red-skin made as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances.

Bright and early the next morning the surgeon was up, and had cut some long saplings with which to make a *travois*, on which he could place the wounded chief.

Then he got breakfast, and afterward dressed the wound of the Indian over again.

The saplings were then rigged to the jury-like shafts, the ends trailing far behind upon the ground, and the lariats made a net-work between them, on which the chief was placed upon his blankets, and those of the man who was so nobly befriending him.

That he was to be taken as a prisoner to the fort, Red Dog had not the slightest doubt, so he was greatly surprised when the surgeon said:

"Chief, you will have to be the guide, for I am going to take you to your village."

In spite of his stoicism the chief showed intense amazement.

"Does my white brother speak straight?" he asked.

"I do."

"Would the White Beaver dare go to my village?"

"I will, for I take the chief there."

"And the Red Dog is not to be taken to the fort?"

"No, for I did not capture you in battle."

* Dr. Frank Powell, of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, late Mayor of LaCrosse, and some years ago a surgeon in the army. He was known as the Surgeon Scout, and the Indians named him White Beaver.—THE AUTHOR.

"I will take the Red Dog to his people."

"The White Beaver is a great chief."

"He will be the brother of the Red Dog," was the reply, and the Red Dog showed that he was impressed by the pluck and kind act combined of the medicine-man of the pale-faces.

Soon after, leading the Indian pony with his load, White Beaver started across the plains in the direction of the Sioux village.

He knew well what danger was before him; but his motive in taking the risk was made evident in a few words he muttered to himself:

"I'll find the way to the old chief's village, and just what number of braves he has."

"This is not such a bad thing, outside of the humanity of caring for the Indian."

Selecting the easiest places for the pony to walk in, for he well knew the pain the Indian must suffer from every jolt, the surgeon held on steadily all day, and at night went into camp, and once more dressed the wounded leg of the red-skin, and looked to his comfort.

The next morning the journey was continued, the plains were left behind, and the climb up into the hills was begun, until just before sunset the village of the Sioux was reached, and the daring white man who had braved so much found himself surrounded by hundreds of savages who he well knew thirsted for his blood.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SOLDIER'S PLEDGE.

THERE was considerable uneasiness in Fort Advance at the long absence of Surgeon Frank Powell, the most popular man at the outpost with officers and soldiers alike.

Outside of his being a most skillful surgeon and physician, he was a courtly gentleman, and brave to recklessness.

He had obtained the name upon the border of the Magic Doctor and the Surgeon Scout, the first from his numerous cures and skill in surgery, and the latter because he was second to no trapper or Indian-fighter on the prairies.

It was his wont often to start out alone on a scout, and his commander was indebted to him for much valuable information he had thus gleaned.

But on his last leaving the fort, he had not expected to be away but a day or two, and two weeks had passed and yet he had not returned, and so there was great anxiety felt for him.

The day of his departure a company of soldiers had had a fight with a large band of Sioux, and had defeated them, and it was feared that after all he had been captured by the red-skins on their retreat.

Search parties had been sent out, but could find no trace of him, and Colonel Rayal, the commandant of Fort Advance was about to dispatch a large force under a gallant young officer to make a thorough search for the missing surgeon, and had given the order, when it was reported that Surgeon Powell was coming across the prairie.

He came on at a gallop, and he was leading a pack-horse weighted down with a freight of some kind.

Cheer after cheer greeted his return, and he went at once to report himself to his colonel.

"Where in the saints' name have you been, Powell?" asked Colonel Rayal, as he welcomed his surgeon back again.

"On a visit to Red Dog the Sioux chief, colonel."

"Ha! a prisoner?"

"Oh no, sir, I have been the guest of the red gentlemen," and laughing at the officer's surprise Surgeon Frank Powell told the story of his adventure, and added:

"Now, Colonel Rayal, I acted from humanity with that red-skin; but there was a lingering belief in my mind that I could glean important information, and I have."

"I got the chief in a fair way to come round all right, and he loaded a pony with presents for me, so I brought them along."

"I am sure that he has too large a force for you to attack him with the men you have."

"But there is one thing that troubles me?"

"Yes, Powell, out with it."

"I would like to find out who the white man is who aids the Sioux."

"Ah!"

The old chief has some white ally among the settlements, I am sure, and it must be some one of importance, for he knows just when to tell Red Dog to move on a raid, and when not to do so.

"Try as I could I was unable to place this man, but I hope to ferret him out soon."

"I shall hang him if we catch him, for I have long wondered how the Sioux were so well posted regarding the movements of my soldiers, and

just at what time the settlements could be attacked with impunity."

"But, Powell, you have done a daring thing to invade that old chief's village, and I know of no other man who could have done so."

"I happened to be a surgeon, sir," was the modest reply, and Frank Powell then sought his own quarters for rest, as he had had a hard time of it.

On the table in his cabin he found several letters, which he read, and one of them seemed to impress him deeply.

It was a letter from one who had been a professor in the medical college where he had completed his studies, and whom he remembered as a true friend to him in his student days.

The professor had inherited a fortune and, giving up his position, had gone North to live, entering into mercantile business there.

Since that time he had not met him, but each year a letter was wont to pass between them.

Now this letter came from the professor, and it was dated from St. Louis, some weeks prior to his reception of it.

The letter was as follows, and will explain to the reader the situation of affairs as they became known to Surgeon Powell:

"St. Louis, June 15, 18—."

"MY DEAR FRIEND POWELL:—"

"Only three days ago I learned from an army officer that you were stationed out on the border, and it accounts for my not hearing from you, as well as my receiving no word of late from you for I have moved from my old home and left it, with its sorrows, behind me."

"Just to think of it, I was a dweller for several years not a hundred miles from your fort, and never knew it."

"To explain, my son Horace, whom you remember as a boy, was killed at college in a duel with a fellow student, and just at that time I had been financially ruined by indorsing for friends."

"Sick at heart I went West and built up a home for myself, my wife and daughter, Mabel, accompanying."

"By a strange coincidence the man who had killed my son lived near us, and, as he saved Mabel's life one day, we buried the hatchet, for we believed him all that was noble, and in fact really felt that Horace had been in the wrong in the duel."

"Alas! it resulted in Mabel's loving the man, and so I hastened to leave our home."

"I had saved considerable money, so went to St. Louis to live."

"But this man, Kent Kingdon, followed us there, secretly married Mabel, and took her back West, I giving to her our old home of Refuge Ranch."

"Now comes the saddest of all, for poor Mabel married, in Kent Kingdon, the veriest human viper."

"She found him out to be the leader of a band of outlaws, and, when she would have fled from him, she found it was too late, for he kept her a prisoner in her own house."

"The one who gave her the information of his crimes promised her his aid, but he never came back to keep his pledge, and he either deserted her or was killed by Kent Kingdon, who could not force Mabel to tell who her informant was."

"A Chinese servant in the house promised Mabel to mail a letter to me for her, for the man's heart was touched, and he did so, and thus I gleaned the story which now I write to you."

"My poor wife is prostrated by the shock, and so I dare not leave her, so write to you, my best of friends."

"I feel that you will do all in your power to rescue my child and bring that villain to justice."

"My home was known as Refuge Ranch, and it is in the Blue Water Valley."

"The man's name is Kent Kingdon, and he is captain of the Cowboy Rangers, men under his own employ."

"Send a messenger, my dear Powell, to the nearest station, and wire me that you will undertake the rescue of my child, and her mother and myself will rest content, for we leave all in your hands."

"My address is below, and Heaven bless you in your work, my noble friend, while the prayers of a stricken mother and father will be with you."

"Ever your attached friend, MANNERS."

Twice did Frank Powell read this letter over, and then he called for an orderly, and said:

"Take this telegram to the stage station, orderly, and ask the agent to send it by the first driver that comes along to the nearest point it can be telegraphed."

"Yes, sir," and the orderly touched his hat and took the telegram, the contents of which were as follows:

"My sincerest sympathies to you both in your deep affliction."

"I start on the trail at once, and pledge myself to the good work of rescue and of justice."

"Will wire result at earliest moment."

"POWELL."

The next day Surgeon Powell started for the Blue Water Valley, and he went alone on the trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MABEL'S VISITOR.

THE young horseman, who had told Mabel

that his business was with her, and caused by his words a pang of dread in her heart, spoke like one who had suffered himself, and therefore felt some pleasure in having others suffer.

"What have you to say to me?" asked Mabel, and she gazed straight into the face of the youth, who seemed to see there a look of intense pain, and at once said:

"Pardon me, for I was too abrupt; but let me tell you that what I have to tell will deeply pain you."

"My God! I fear that it is so."

"For Heaven's sake, tell me all that you have to tell!"

"Let me know the worst at once."

"May I ask you your name?"

"I told you I was Mrs. Kingdon."

"I mean your maiden name."

"Who and what are you?"

"One who, though giving you pain, is your friend."

The words were spoken in a tone that was assuring, and Mabel said:

"Be seated, sir, please."

The visitor obeyed, and Mabel took an easy-chair opposite to him.

"Now, sir, let me say that my maiden name was Mabel Manners."

"Good God!"

With this exclamation, the young man sprung to his feet.

His face was white, his eyes flashing, and he asked in suppressed tones, as he stepped close up to Mabel:

"Do you mean that you were the sister of Horace Manners?"

"Yes."

"Who was killed in a duel while at college?"

"Yes."

"Was killed by a fellow-student—one Kent Kingdon?"

"Yes."

"Killed by the man who is now your husband?"

"Yes."

"Heavens! what a situation!"

"Did you know this when you became his wife?"

"I did."

"And yet married him?"

"Yes."

"God in Heaven! how could you?"

"I loved him."

The visitor seemed completely taken aback at this simple reply.

He took a turn across the room, and then came back to his place in front of Mabel.

"What a strange thing woman's love is!"

"I confess I cannot fathom it."

"I believe you said you had something to make known to me, sir," coldly said Mabel.

"I did say so, and I have much to tell you."

The voice and manner of the visitor had changed.

The tones were no longer harsh, but had become as gentle as a woman's, and the eyes had lost their fierce light.

"Let me tell you that I knew your brother well, and loved him as my dearest friend."

"I also knew Kent Kingdon in those days, and he did me a wrong which his life only can wipe out."

"What I am, I need not now tell you; but let me say that I have been for a long time dogging the steps of Kent Kingdon."

"Would you know what I have found out, for that is what I came here to tell you?"

"I would know all," and Mabel was impressed with the changed manner of her visitor, it had become so soft and gentle.

"I will tell you as gently as I can, for I wish not to give you pain other than I have to do."

"A while ago I did not care, for I had suffered so deeply it was almost a pleasure for me to see others feel pain."

"Now that I know who you are it is different, and I would spare you all in my power."

"Who are you?"

"Call me Kitty Trumps, for that is the name by which others know me, in these parts at least."

"A strange name."

"True; but I deserve it from the fact that I always hold trump cards in the games I play," was the strange reply.

"But to my story," and the youth gave an impatient toss of his head.

"I will not tell you now how it was that Kent Kingdon wronged me; but he did me an injury that I can never forget, and have vowed to avenge."

"I started on his trail, after schooling myself to meet any hardship and to dread no danger that might beset my path."

"It was no easy task to find the trail of the man who had killed your brother."

"He had lived in Texas, I knew, so I went thither in search of him."

"But his father had failed and he had lost his fortune, I discovered on going there, and I had to look for him elsewhere."

"I knew that he was in hiding, fearing to be taken back and tried for the murder of your brother, for as such I look upon it."

"At last I hit upon a way, after over a year's search of him, to find out by a new plan, if I could not discover his hiding-place."

"I knew that he had left his matters in the hands of Hugh Lawton, his second in the duel, and letters had passed between them under some disguise."

"So I went to the home of Hugh Lawton, and, sending him off on a false errand, I searched his rooms, carrying with me skeleton keys for the purpose."

"I know that most people have the foolish practice of keeping their old letters."

"So I found it with Lawton, for he had letters there from Kent Kingdon."

"It was his handwriting, but not his name attached."

"The name was Donald King, his own changed about and divided."

"It was post-marked at a place here in the far West, and so I at once started for the little town."

"I had photographs of Kent Kingdon, and it did not take me very long to discover that he had spent some little time in the place."

"He had become noted in that border town as a successful gambler and a dead shot."

"I traced him, step by step from there to the mining-camps, and at last found that he had become known as Don, the Card King."

"He was the proprietor of a gambling hell, I discovered in a Colorado camp, and thither I went."

"But he had sought other parts, and everywhere folks had strange stories to tell of him."

"They spoke of his handsome face, the face of an angel hiding the heart of a devil, and his superb form was referred to, while his pluck and nerve were the admiration of all."

"He was so lucky at cards that he had won the name of Card King, and many believed that he cheated, only it was not safe to tell him so, as many found to their cost."

"In spite of my hatred for him, I could not but admire the man."

"Well, I continued to dog him from post to post, but some presentiment of my being on his trail must have caused him to skip out of a camp or town just before my coming, and I had to take up the broken thread again."

"In all this time I was not idle."

"I had always been a good rider, but I practiced until I became an expert."

"I shot half a hundred bullets away a day in practicing with rifle and revolver, and made myself skillful in all that a man in these wild parts should know."

"I met dangers, but overcame them, saw many a tragedy, and became accustomed to bloodshed, until it made no impression upon me."

"Thus I schooled myself to meet the man face to face whom I sought, and be his equal at his own game when we did meet."

"I gambled and my luck was phenomenal."

"But enough of myself, more than to say that I found at last that Kent Kingdon, the Card King, had killed a man in a mining-camp one night, who had accused him of cheating."

"Each had staked their fortune on their life, and the one who survived was to get all."

"Kent Kingdon killed him of course, and he left the place soon after."

"It was a long time before I found any trace of him again, so well did he cover up his tracks."

"But at last I discovered that he had gone to claim the fortune of the man he had killed, and thus I found him, living as a ranchero on the man's estate."

"I could have killed him then, but I felt that he was not living the honest life he pretended to live, and so I set spies to watch him."

"I preferred to catch him in his deviltry and get him hanged."

"At last I got wind of his game, and so came here to seek him out, for I heard that he was married, and I felt a sweet revenge in making his wife feel who it was that she had married."

"But I did not know that Mabel Kingdon was his wife, or I would have never felt so."

"But it is too late now to go back, for I have Kent Kingdon in my power, and what I know will hang him."

"Hang him!"

It was the first word that Mabel had uttered during the story of her visitor.

She had seemed like a statue, so motionless and white-faced she was, and only when the youth had said that he could hang Kent Kingdon did she start and repeat his words:

"Hang him?"

"Yes, I can hang him, and his fate will be a just one, for Kent Kingdon is the Chief of the Owls of the Overland."

A wild cry broke from the lips of poor Mabel, and she sunk back in her chair seemingly devoid of life.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ACCUSATION.

FROM some reason Kent Kingdon returned home sooner than he anticipated.

He whistled, as was his wont, for the Chinese who cared for his horses, and then entered the house.

He fairly shrunk backward several steps, when he saw Mabel.

She stood before him erect, with heaving bosom, flashing eyes and a face that was as colorless and cold as marble.

"My heavens, Mabel! are you ill?"

"Physically, no, mentally, yes."

"What ails you?" he asked, more than ever impressed by her harsh voice.

"I am just recovering from the shock of having discovered who and what you are."

"Pray explain," and he flinched under her steady gaze.

"I need not explain, when I tell you that I have married the Card King of Colorado, sir."

"Ha! who has dared lie against me?" he cried, angrily.

"No lie has been told."

"I say it has, for I know the one you speak of, but I am not he."

"You have not forgotten the letter I read?"

"No, and it was not for me."

"Kent Kingdon, you need be false to me no longer, for I know what you are?"

"And what am I?" he asked, having regained his cool manner and tone.

"Do you wish me to tell you?"

"Yes, tell me what you have heard?"

"You once loved a fair lady by the name of Camille Cameron, did you not?"

"Bah! I had a flirtation with such a woman, but she was jealous as she could be and I gave her up."

"Afterward she became engaged to my brother, whom you killed?"

"Yes, our quarrel was about her."

"Well, what else?"

"You then came West and became a card-sharp, I believe."

"Be careful, for men who have accused me of sharp practice in playing cards have only a grave to mark that they once lived."

"Yes, my brother was not the only one you murdered."

"Curses! woman, would you drive me to kill you?"

"I believe you equal to it."

"Don't be a fool, Mabel, but tell me who has put all this nonsense into your head?"

"Your enemy."

"Ha! and who is he?"

"One who hates you."

"And you believe what such a person tells you of me?"

"I do, when I am given the proof."

"You have no proof."

"I have."

"Show it me."

"Not yet."

"When will you?"

"When I face you in a court of justice I will bring my proof."

"Ha! you threaten me?"

"I wish you to understand, Kent Kingdon, that I am no longer the innocent child I was when you dragged me from the river."

"I would rather have died than to have lived to know you as you are, to feel that I have loved the murderer of my poor brother."

"His specter has often haunted me, and yet my love for you drove it away, and I tried to forget who you were."

"But now I have you revealed to me in all your hideous life of sin."

"My God! what have I done, other than play a game of cards for gold, and killed a man or two who insulted me?" he said, with deprecating manner.

"That is not the worst, Kent Kingdon."

"Ah! you have heard more?"

"Yes."

"Well, out with it, for I wish you to make all your charges against me at once."

"I wish you to let me go at once away from you."

"No."

"Had you not returned so soon I would have been gone, and you would never have seen me again."

"Let me go, Kent, and never cross my path again," and she spoke pleadingly.

"I will not let you go."

"Do pray let me leave you, and take my advice, Kent Kingdon, and save yourself while you may."

"From what should I fly?"

"From danger that lurks in your path."

"I do not wish to see you hang, so give you fair warning."

"Go, go and hide yourself in some far-away corner of the earth, that you may escape the doom that will certainly be yours."

"Bah! I am not easily frightened at a woman's fears."

"Mine are no idle fears, Kent Kingdon."

"I have warned you, and you refuse to heed that warning, so I will do no more."

"Do you threaten me?"

"Yes, if so you will it."

"With what?"

"I told you, *the gallows*."

He paled slightly, but said:

"Do you mean that card-playing for gold, and killing a man in self-defense, is a hanging offense?"

"There are other crimes, Kent Kingdon, that you are guilty of."

"What other, for instance?"

"You have heard of the Owls of the Overland?"

He started, but said indifferently:

"Who has not heard of that band of cut-throats?"

"You are their chief, Kent Kingdon!"

He uttered a savage oath at the words, and his face turned livid.

"Who dares accuse me of this?"

"One who can prove all he charges you with."

"By the saints, but I will know who my accuser is."

"Speak, woman, or I'll wring the words from your throat!" and he sprung toward Mabel and grasped her by her soft, slender throat.

"Would you kill me, Kent?" she gasped.

"Who has been here to see you?"

"A man."

"His name?"

"He called himself Trumps."

"Ha! I have heard of that man as my shadow, for he has dogged me persistently."

"Who is he?"

"He told me that he was known as Trumps."

"And he told you all that you have heard of me?"

"Yes."

"And you believe his lies?"

"I believe all that he told me of you, Kent Kingdon."

"By Heaven! but I shall drag him to your feet and make him eat his false words."

So saying, he threw Mabel from him with a force that dashed her to the floor, while her throat was red from his cruel grip upon it.

Leaving the room, he called to the Chinese servants.

They looked terrified at his angry face.

"Who has been here?" he thundered.

"Young 'Melican man."

"How long ago?"

"He left two hour."

"Which way did he go?"

"Took trailee thatee way," and the Chinese pointed eastward.

"Bring me my horse Sable at once."

The Chinese darted off to obey, and to Wing-Wing the enraged man said a few words in a low tone.

"Me understandee," he said with a sly wink, and his comrade coming up just then with Sable, a splendid animal, black as jet, Kent Kingdon threw himself into his saddle and dashed away.

CHAPTER XX.

PRISONERS.

ALL the love in the heart of Mabel for Kent Kingdon had turned to hatred, and she fairly loathed the man she had once so madly idolized.

The change was sudden and complete, and it came in a moment when Trumps had proven to her that all he said had been true.

At last he had left the ranch, but before he did so, Mabel had arranged with him a plan of escape.

She would leave the cabin by night, saddle her own horse and meet Trumps in a clump of

woods not far from the house, and they would go together.

Trumps had told her to seek the house of some neighbor and crave shelter and concealment there until he could go to the fort and secure a force to capture Kent Kingdon and his whole band of Owls of the Overland.

"You can leave a letter for Kent Kingdon, telling him that you have ceased to love him and, taking your own horse, have gone to the stage station to take the coach for the East, where you will rejoin your parents."

"This will throw him off his guard, and give you a chance to be in hiding until I can arrange my plans."

So Trumps had said, and that night Mabel was to join him in the timber and he was to accompany her to the home of a settler, one who lived alone with his wife and had been most friendly with her parents.

But the unlooked-for return of Kent Kingdon had broken into her plan, and yet, when she saw him face to face, she had softened enough to warn him to make his escape, showing him that she knew all.

He had refused, and more, he had clutched her throat in his iron grasp and hurled her from him in his fury so that she fell to the floor.

Then he left her, and in her heart there was not one atom of feeling for him other than bitterest hatred.

"This night I leave here forever, and woe be unto Kent Kingdon, for I shall never again say aught to warn him to fly from the fate that now I know he must meet," and she spoke with a bitterness that came from her inmost heart.

When Kent Kingdon left the place, she set to work to gather into a package all that she wished to take with her.

Then she went out and, as was often her wont, turned her favorite horse Rescue, the animal which Kingdon had been riding when he saved her life, out in the yard near the cabin.

Her saddle and bridle were on the piazza, and she felt that she would have no difficulty in escaping that night at the appointed time to meet Trumps.

Night came and, when all was quiet, she set to work, and soon had all in readiness for her departure.

But, as she stepped out upon the piazza, she was suddenly confronted by two dark forms.

Instantly she shrunk back, and a voice said:

"You are under guard, lady, by the captain's orders, so don't make it bad for yourself by trying to escape."

She was almost crushed under the blow that fell so unexpectedly upon her.

She knew that she was the prisoner of the man who had wrecked her life, and she made no reply; but she dreaded for Trumps, for, as she did not appear, he might come to the house in search of her.

Then her worst fears were aroused as she saw her horse brought up, and a man spring into the saddle.

Upon his head was one of her own hats, and a shawl and skirt enveloped him.

Away he rode in the darkness, and he went directly toward the timber where she was to meet Trumps.

He was not gone very long, and when he returned he was not alone.

"He has been captured," groaned Mabel.

The two approached the cabin and a man on the piazza called out:

"You've got him, Tom?"

"Yes."

"The game worked all right?"

"Oh yes, he thought I was the lady until I had my arms around him, and then he surrendered, for I had my grip on his shooting-irons."

"Where will we put him?"

"In the spare room, I guess," was the reply, and Trumps was forthwith taken to a room on the other side of the hallway from Mabel's room.

"This is that man's work, so I have more cause to note him."

"Ah! if I could but get away from here," cried Mabel, almost in despair, for with Trumps a prisoner she had no hope of rescue, and she knew that all his plans must fall through and that Kent Kingdon had the game in his own hands.

An hour later the sound of approaching hoof-falls came to the ears of Mabel, who had not yet retired, and soon after Kent Kingdon rode up to the piazza and dismounted.

"Ah, Tom, you got my word then, and came?" he said, as the man who had captured Mabel appeared.

"Yes, captain."

"Any developments?"

"The lady tried to escape, sir."

"As I expected; but you caught her?"

"Oh, yes, sir, and one other."

"Ah, who was it?"

"A young man whom we noticed skulking in the timber, sir."

"The lady was to meet him there, and I put on a skirt and bonnet and just caught him nice and slick."

"You have done well, for I went after that same man, but failed to find him."

"Where is he?"

"In the spare room, sir."

"Good! see that he does not escape, and I will see him in the morning," and Kent Kingdon went to the sitting-room and threw himself down upon a lounge for the night, while Mabel, who had heard all that had been said, gave up all hope, and going to bed cried as though her heart would break, until at last, utterly worn out, she dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CHINESE FRIEND.

WITH his wife in durance vile, so that she could not escape to do him harm, and the young man, Trumps, who had been the one to betray him to Mabel, wholly in his power, Kent Kingdon slept without anxiety for the morrow.

What to do with Mabel he hardly knew.

He was not willing to give her up, at least, not yet, and he dared, not, with the knowledge she possessed, allow her to go free.

Who the youth was he did not know.

Cowboy Tom had told him he was as handsome as a woman, and yet had a nerve that he could not but admire.

For a long time past, Kent Kingdon had heard of one who was on his track.

He was simply known as Trumps, and it was said that he was even more successful than was Kingdon, the Card King, in handling the pasteboards.

He was said to be hardly more than a boy, and yet was one fully able to take care of himself under all circumstances.

The constant inquiries he made for Kingdon soon reached his ears, and it was certain that he was following steadily and persistently on his trail.

More than this the Card King knew nothing about him, and he had even forgotten his existence, when he suddenly turned up at Refuge Ranch.

And more still, he turned up in a dangerous way, for he had dared to betray him, Kingdon, to his wife.

In his attempt to capture the young stranger, the Card King had failed, so it was a cause of rejoicing to him to know that he had him safe and sound in the cabin, through the cunning of Cowboy Tom who had entrapped him.

The Card King awoke late the following morning, and when he came out of the sitting-room where he had slept, his wife had had her breakfast and was standing upon the piazza.

Around the house, at some distance, were several cowboys, and Mabel knew that they were the guards, although they seemed not to notice her.

She did not address her husband as he came out upon the piazza, nor even glance toward him, so he said:

"Well, Mabel, you failed to escape last night."

"It is a long lane that has no turning, Sir Card King."

"And your friend, with whom you were to elope, was captured, and is now safe in yonder room."

"You know that I meant not to elope, but to seek my freedom, to escape from the power of the captain of the Owls of the Overland."

"May I ask if you intend to keep me a prisoner here?"

"Yes, until you accede to my wishes."

"What are they?"

"I happened to discover that your father purchased, some years ago when he was a rich man, a lot of worthless land to help a friend out."

"He has refused to sell it time and again, and upon its surface it does not appear to be worth five hundred dollars."

"But gold has been found in it, by whom, no matter, and I want that land."

"I knew of it when I made you my wife, so concluded to make myself owner by marrying you, although I confess I loved you as much as it is in my nature to love any woman."

"I wrote to your father and offered to buy it of him."

"He refused to sell it from some reason, and then I wrote and told him that the day before my duel with Horace I loaned him one thousand dollars, and held his due-bill for it."

"This I would return to him, with as much more in cash for the land.

"He replied that he would not sell the land, as he had been advised not to do so.

"Now, I wish you to write to your father as I dictate, telling him you wish him to give you the land, and when this is done you can go your way, leaving me whenever you wish, but until I own that property you are to be a prisoner.

"Now you know what to do to escape from your present situation.

"What do you say?"

"I am not a member of the Owls of the Overland band, Captain Kingdon, to rob my father, so I refuse," was the indignant response.

"Very well, I shall keep you a prisoner for some time, and if you do not yield then, I will find another way to make you do so."

"I am not one to yield, Kent Kingdon, when the yielding means the robbery of my noble father, so do your worst," and Mabel turned and entered her room.

Wing-Wing was then clearing off the breakfast things, and Mabel motioned to him to remain.

Then she hastily wrote a letter to her father, and gave it to him, along with a twenty-dollar gold-piece.

"Mail it the moment you get the chance to send it to the stage station," she whispered.

"Allee lightee. Me got to havee things to eattee, and go buy to-day," replied the Chinese.

That day Wing-Wing drove in the wagon to the nearest store, after provisions, and the letter was mailed.

That was the letter which Doctor Manners had received, and at once wrote to Surgeon Powell about receiving his pledge to rescue Mabel from the power of Kent Kingdon.

The Chinese knew just what his master was, and he was a sharer in the plunder taken by the Owls of the Overland; but he had proven a friend in need to Mabel in mailing the letter, and she felt most grateful to him for it.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BEAUTIFUL NEMESIS.

AFTER his unsuccessful interview with Mabel, Kent Kingdon took his breakfast alone, but ate with little relish.

The cabin of the Refuge Ranch was, as I have said, a very large one.

It had been added to, for a wing had been built upon one side, and in one of the rooms therein Trumps had been imprisoned.

He had gone to bed at once, taking his imprisonment very coolly, and when Wing-Wing had brought him his breakfast he had greatly enjoyed it.

Having decided to settle the mystery about the strange youth, who had been dogging his steps for so long a while, Kent Kingdon had gone to the room, and, unlocking the door had entered.

There by the window sat Trumps, gazing out as though longing to be free.

"So my young Adonis, you attempted to elope with my wife last night?" said Kingdon with a sneer.

He gazed upon the youth with a look in which there seemed partial recognition of one whom he had seen before.

"You know that you believe no such thing, as that your wife would elope with any one, and that I only sought to aid her to escape from you," was the haughty reply.

"And missed it, eh?"

"Yes; but it's a long lane that has no turning, Captain Kingdon."

His wife's own words.

They impressed him as though a blow had been struck him.

"Where have we met before?" he asked impatiently. "I cannot recall you."

"Do you remember one, Carter Cameron?"

"Ah! a West Point Cadet when I knew him, and the brother of my old lady-love, Camille Cameron."

"It is he to whom I refer."

"Are you Carter Cameron?"

"Do you not now recall me?"

"Yes, and you are strangely like your sister. Have you taken up her quarrel against me, may I ask?"

"Yes. And I have trailed you here, to have you hanged."

In spite of his nerve the man winced and turned pale.

"What deep injury did I ever do your sister?"

"You first won her love, and then trifled with it."

"She consoled herself by loving Horace Manners."

"Whom you killed, and whose death I will avenge."

"He was engaged to my sister, her whole soul was wrapped up in him, and he was the idol of her life."

"You cast a slur upon her in his presence, and before others, which he resented promptly, and the result was that fatal duel."

"He fell by your hand and the sunshine went out of Camille's life from that day."

"It nearly killed her at first, though people said she was cold and unloving; but she was plotting revenge."

"Fortunately an uncle died and left us a handsome fortune, so I was able to do as my sister urged, and follow upon your trail."

"She felt that you would do some act that would give the hangman another hold upon you, and thus could you be brought to the gallows."

"Do you know why I have followed you, Kent Kingdon, chief of the Overland Owls?"

The youth had spoken with deep earnestness, and when he ceased Kent Kingdon suddenly sprang toward him.

Grasping his arms before he could draw back, he dragged him close to the window, and then gazed fixedly into his face.

Then sharp and ringing came his words:

"By Heaven, but you are not Carter Cameron—your story is a good one, you have played your part well, but I know you now, Camille Cameron!"

Then with an oath he threw her from him and strode from the room.

The secret was out, the beautiful Nemesis was known to the man she had so successfully tracked.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Surgeon Frank Powell left Fort Advance alone, he felt that he had a perilous undertaking on hand.

But he was not a man to shrink from any danger, and his splendid nerve had helped him out of many a scrape where other men would have gone under.

He had taken with him a pack-horse, and the animal was as fine as one as the splendid creature he rode, so that he had as good a mount in one as in the other.

Going prepared for an indefinite stay, he had prepared accordingly, with extra ammunition, clothes and a camping outfit, and these formed the contents of the pack, the faithful horse that bore it not having to be led but trotting alongside of his master, obedient to his slightest word or call.

Then before his departure from the fort, Surgeon Powell had held a long conversation with Colonel Rayal.

The result of this was that soon after he left, a party of cavalry, two-score in number, accompanied by several scouts, and under command of a young lieutenant who had several times distinguished himself, started off for a certain designated point where they were to go into a secret camp and await orders from Surgeon Powell.

But it is just now with the Surgeon Scout that we have to deal, so we will strike his trail and see where it will lead us.

His way led toward the Blue Water Valley settlement, and the afternoon of the second day from the fort, he rode into a dense piece of timber, taking a trail which he seemed to have followed before.

A ride of half a mile brought him to a canyon, going back into a heavily wooded hill, and down this a small stream flowed.

The canyon did not penetrate very far back, but it was accessible only from the entrance, and its sides were carpeted with the finest grass, while the rivulet came from a spring that burst out of the rocks at the upper end of the gorge.

Unless a person should go up into the canyon to camp, there would seemingly be no other motive to take him there.

And it appeared that this was the motive of Surgeon Powell, for he dismounted and at once set about building a camp.

He first cut with a hatchet taken from his pack some long sapplings and made a barrier at a narrow part of the canyon, to prevent his horses getting out.

A shelter of boughs was then thrown up, wood gathered for a fire, and the surgeon was ready for his supper and to retire.

He slept comfortably and well, with seemingly no dread of danger; but was up bright and early and had breakfast.

Then he saddled one of his horses, mounted and rode down the canyon, putting up the barrier, and leaving the other animal in camp.

As though acquainted with the country to some extent, he made his way to the main trail and soon after came upon the humble home of a settler.

The owner was in a field at work, and eyed him as he rode up with the look of a man who was ever ready for danger.

"My friend, can you tell me if this trail will lead me to Refuge Ranch?" asked the Surgeon Scout.

"Oh, yes, pard, but it's about seven mile from here. You be a soldier, isn't you?"

"Yes, I am from the fort, and wished to visit an old friend at Refuge Ranch, Doctor Manners."

"Lordy, pard, he's been gone a long time, and it's sorry I am of it, for he was a powerful fine doctor, and we hated to have him leave the settlement; but he's gone East, though his darter married Captain Kent Kingdon, the cap'n of the Cowboy Rangers, and they lives there now."

"Ah, indeed, then I will find them there?" and Surgeon Powell rode on his way.

A long while before he had scouted through that country, and had a remembrance of it, as scouts always do who have a good bump of location.

He had never seen Refuge Ranch, and was surprised at its proportions and look of solid comfort, there in the wilderness.

Upon the piazza stood Kent Kingdon, smoking a cigar, and as he caught sight of him coming along the trail he slightly started.

"A soldier! he cannot be alone."

"Ho, Tom!"

"Yes, sir," and the guard whose duty it was to be ever near, came toward his captain.

"Get Buck and go in and gag and bind those women, or there will be the deuce to pay here."

It was a cruel order, but it was executed without the slightest trouble, for, rather than struggle, both Mabel and Camille Cameron consented to the indignity.

Weeks had passed away and they were still in captivity, Kent Kingdon was still master of the situation.

After his recognition of Camille Cameron in "Trumps," Kent Kingdon had at once allowed her to go to the room with Mabel, knowing that she could tell her no more about him than she already had.

There the two had lived in captivity, Wing-Wing supplying them with their meals.

Mabel had been fairly startled at discovering in Trumps a woman.

She had never suspected such a thing for a moment; but she was glad that it was so, and that in Camille she found her dead brother's old lady-love.

When cowboys Tom and Buck came in to bind and gag them, they could not understand what was the matter; but they submitted in silence.

Hardly had the two cowboys left the room before Surgeon Powell rode up and was pleasantly saluted by Kent Kingdon, who said:

"I am glad to welcome you, sir, to Refuge Ranch, for I see that you are an officer from the post. My name is Kent Kingdon, sir."

"And my name is Frank Powell."

"I am Post Surgeon," was the quiet response of Frank Powell, as he dismounted and joined Kent Kingdon upon the piazza.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN OBSTACLE ON THE TRAIL.

"I AM glad to meet Surgeon Powell, whom I have often heard of as White Beaver and the Surgeon Scout."

"You will be my guest, sir, for some time, I hope; but are you alone?"

"Yes, Mr. Kingdon, my command is not with me, and I came to visit an old friend, whose house I believed this was."

"I refer to Doctor Manners."

"Ah, yes, he left some time ago; but his daughter is my wife, though just now she is away from home for a few days visiting some neighbors."

"I am sorry you will not be able to see her."

"And so am I, sir, though I have not met her since she was a girl. I believe you command the Cowboy Rangers, do you not, sir?"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell, and we have been ever ready to help the soldiers from the fort when needed."

Thus they talked together for some time, Surgeon Powell trying to draw the ranchero out on many topics, and at the same time studying the situation as well as he could.

He knew that Kingdon spoke falsely when he said that Mabel was away visiting neighbors.

"I believe she is here, and, as her father said, a prisoner."

"I must try my other plan to find her out,"

he mused to himself, while Kent Kingdon was talking.

So natural seemed the visit of the Surgeon Scout, that not a suspicion of him was aroused in the mind of Kent Kingdon.

He took the visit, as Frank Powell had said it was, and parted from him in a very friendly manner, seeming to regret that he could not stay longer.

"I wish to overtake my command," had been Powell's excuse, and mounting his horse, he rode away on the trail toward the fort.

Every word that had been said by the two, as they were seated on the piazza, both Mabel and Camille had heard.

"Oh! that we could have given an alarm!" cried Mabel, after Cowboy Tom had come in and released them of their bonds and taken the gags from their mouths.

"The result would have been to get that splendid Surgeon Scout killed, for Kingdon has half a dozen of his cowboys within call, and it would not have bettered our case, Mabel."

"You are right, Camille; I did not think of that; but do you know I think he came here for a purpose."

"He stated it—to see your father."

"Somehow I feel that he had another motive in coming."

"Heaven grant that he did, and if so, Mabel, we are in safe hands, for I have often heard of the wonderful deeds of the Surgeon Scout."

And while they talked on, Surgeon Powell was quietly riding away from the cabin.

"Tom, mount your horse and see if the surgeon takes the direct trail to the Overland, which leads to the fort, for he is a dangerous man to have in these parts, and might be inquisitive if he met any of the men."

Tom departed at once, and closely dogged the trail of Surgeon Powell until he saw him take the one which led to the Overland.

"No harm in him," he muttered, and he went back and so reported to his chief.

Had he gone further, however, he would have seen the Surgeon Scout turn back, having purposely gone the way he did in case he should be tracked.

As he reached a rise of land, which was heavily wooded, Surgeon Powell glanced back and caught sight of a horseman off upon the prairie.

He knew that he had not been seen by the stranger, and was anxious to get a closer view of him, so concealed his horse near by and took up his position in the woods.

As the man came along Surgeon Powell saw that he was well armed and mounted, though his horse had the appearance of having had a hard ride of it.

"He may be an honest fellow, and he may be an Overland Owl," mused the Surgeon Scout, as the horseman drew nearer.

Then he gazed more intently at him, and muttered in a surprised tone:

"As I live, it is Dick Roberts, the deserter!"

A moment after, and the Surgeon Scout stepped in front of the man, and, with revolver leveled, called out:

"Hands up, Dick Roberts, the deserter!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A DESERTER'S MEMORY.

THE man whom Surgeon Powell had so unexpectedly confronted was fairly caught.

He, however, reined his horse back with one hand, as though to turn in flight, while with the other he drew a revolver.

But he did not use it, for he said:

"Not upon you can I fire, Surgeon Powell. I surrender, sir."

"You are wise, Roberts, in doing so; but I must tie you, for I remember you of old."

"Don't be hard on me, Surgeon Powell, for you know that my capture means death."

"I know that well, and between ourselves, my man, you deserve it."

"But I wish a talk with you, so come over here in the timber with me, away from the trail."

The man obeyed, and they halted at the spot where Surgeon Powell's horse was in hiding.

"Dismount and sit there, Roberts, where I can see your face."

"It is useless to tell you that I will stand no trifling."

"It is, sir, for I know you."

Having taken the man's belt of arms, Surgeon Powell stood opposite to him, his arms folded, and leaning against a tree, as he gazed straight into his face.

"Dick Roberts, do you remember the time when my horse was shot and the red-skins in full pursuit of us, that you turned back, dis-

mounted and helped me to my feet, for I was badly hurt, and then gave me your horse, springing up behind me yourself?"

"I remember it, sir."

"Do you remember, also, that owing you my life, when you killed Corporal Batt, you would have been shot had I not helped you to escape?"

"I will never forget it, sir."

"You were not to blame, I was sure, in killing the corporal, for he attacked you; but you were not popular, had a bad record, and so the case went against you, and you are now under sentence, as well as being a deserter."

"I remember it all, sir, and that you returned the favor I did you."

"I'll never forget you, Surgeon Powell."

"Now, Roberts, I have heard that you were a member of the outlaw band known as Overland Owls."

"Did I want proof of it, here it is, as this is one of the head-dresses those devils wear," and Surgeon Powell suddenly drew out of the man's hunting-shirt an object that at first looked like an owl's head.

But it was a feather mask, made to represent an owl's head.

"I'm done for, sir, that's certain."

"That depends."

"Ob, sir, don't let me die."

"Now, Roberts, these Owls cannot much longer keep up their desperate work of outlawry."

"I know who their chief is, and I believe you are now going to him with news of some kind."

"Sooner or later the end must come, and the gallows will be your end if you go on as you now are doing."

"What can I do, sir, for I am in your hands?" and the man's whole face was full of anguish at his position.

"I will tell you."

"Please do, sir."

"I will get you a pardon from the President, and then, that you may lead an honest life, I will give you a situation as manager of my ranch in Nebraska, for I well know your ability, and that you enlisted in the army as a private because you were penniless."

"I did, sir; I was born for a different life, but I threw my chances away."

"Now, Roberts, if you will obey me in all things, I will do as I have said, and I mean that you shall be my ally in running the Owls of the Overland to earth."

"I hate to betray my comrades, sir, bad as we all are."

"Listen, I know that Kent Kingdon of Refuge Ranch is your chief."

"Am I not right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suspect that all the cowboys in his employ, and he has four ranches, I believe, are his men, and no more or less than Owls."

"Now, with this knowledge I can go in and ferret out matters myself; but I wish to hasten it through with your aid, as Kingdon has his wife a prisoner, and he deserves hanging if ever man did."

"I do not wish you to appear in the matter, simply be my ally, and I will do as I told you."

"If you refuse, I have a company of cavalry near here, under command of your former lieutenant, Carter Cameron, and I will place you in his hands and he will carry out the colonel's orders, to shoot you dead wherever found."

"Which will you choose, Roberts?"

"Oh, sir! there is no choice, for I am tired of this life of outlawry."

"And you will not prove treacherous to me?"

"Did I not risk my life to save you one day, Surgeon Powell?"

"Did you not help me to escape?"

"Could I be treacherous to you, sir?"

"I believe in your good faith, Roberts, and here is my hand on it."

"Now come to my camp with me and tell me what you know about these Overland Owls."

"I am going to see the chief now, sir."

"I thought so; and you have news for him?"

"I have a letter from the lieutenant, sir."

"Where is he?"

"At the other end of the line, sir, living on the ranch."

"I see. How many ranches has Kingdon?"

"He has seven, sir."

"And how many pretended cowboys?"

"He has six with him, sir, five with the lieutenant, and four at each of the other ranches, sir, one of whom pretends to be the boss, you know, of the place."

"Thirty-one, and two more counting Kingdon and the lieutenant."

"Yes, sir, and I live at the ranch with the lieutenant, and am special courier."

"All right, now for the letter."

The man handed it over, and the two rode on to the Surgeon Scout's secret camp, each lost in his own thoughts.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHITE BEAVER'S PLOT.

THE Surgeon Scout found his camp just as he had left it, his horse enjoying himself, as he felt that he was literally in clover.

The horses of the surgeon and the deserter were turned loose, and then dinner was cooked and both enjoyed it, as they had had nothing to eat since breakfast, and it was then after dark.

The letter bore no address, and by the fire-light Surgeon Powell read it aloud, for he opened the envelope without difficulty, so that it could be resealed.

The letter read as follows:

"A Government train, ten wagons."

"Sixty mules."

"One Paymaster's ambulance, with money to pay soldiers."

"Ten drivers."

"Guard of six soldiers mounted."

"Arrive at Wildcat Canyon on Sunday."

"Rich treat."

There was no signature and in spite of its disjointed sentences, Surgeon Powell understood that there was a Government train, richly freighted, with paymaster along to pay troops, bound to the fort, and the number of men accompanying given, while Wildcat Canyon would be the place to attack them.

"I was most fortunate in meeting you, Roberts, for that train would have been wiped out by the Owls, and after such a rich haul they could have escaped from the country."

"This goes to your credit, my friend."

"I am glad, sir."

"Now, Roberts, I want you to go on to-morrow to Refuge Ranch, and give this letter to Kingdon."

"You see I trust you."

"You can, sir."

"Then, I suppose you will start back to order the different gangs of cowboys to rendezvous at Wildcat Canyon?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will meet you at the place I met you yesterday, and thus know Kingdon's plans, and you can go on and obey your orders, after which you are to join me, for you must keep from going upon the trail with the Owls."

"I can, sir, for I'll play sick."

"All right."

"Then join me at Bald Knob Canyon, Saturday at noon."

"I'll be there, sir, without fail."

"And do not be alarmed if you see soldiers, for remember you are my ally and I protect you."

"Yes, sir."

"Now here are your weapons, and we will turn in for the night, and to-morrow begin to carry out our plot."

Bright and early the surgeon and the deserter were awake, and the latter soon after rode off on his mission, while the former took a trail that would lead him to the scene of their meeting on the afternoon before.

For hours the surgeon remained in watching, but at last the forms of a horse and rider appeared in view, and he recognized the deserter.

Showing himself, he walked away toward where he had left his horse, and there Dick Roberts soon joined him.

"Well, Roberts, what news?"

"I must hurry, sir, for the captain will be along presently, as he is going to the ranches to collect the men, and I have orders to tell the lieutenant to meet him with his cowboys at the Dry Brook to-morrow night, for it is not very far from the Wildcat Canyon."

"Good; you have done well; but did you discover anything about Kingdon's wife?"

"Yes, sir."

"Out with it."

"She's kept a prisoner in the cabin, along with another lady, who came there as a boy, tracking the captain."

"Aha! and got caught?"

"Yes, sir; and there are the cowboys on guard over them, and they'll remain, along with the captain's two Chinese servants, while the chief and his other four men will soon be along on their way to the Dry Brook."

"You have done nobly, Roberts."

"Now go on, and I will meet you, as I said, Saturday afternoon."

"No, sir; and I'll be there."

So saying, the deserter rode away, while Frank Powell lay hidden until he saw Kent Kingdon and four cowboys pass.

"The scamp has done well to thus hide his hand under the cover of rancheros and cowboys. Now I can understand why he never did any service in fighting the Indians, but made believe do so, for he is friendly with old Red Dog, the Sioux chief."

"To-night I shall make another visit to Refuge Ranch."

Upon his return to his secret camp, Surgeon Powell set to work to metamorphose himself completely.

He took from his pack a rough suit of clothes, boots and a slouch hat.

Then he gave his hair and beard an unkempt appearance, and the pack produced another saddle and bridle, and these he put upon the horse which he had left in camp on his former visit to the ranch.

Buckling on his belt of arms, he started for Refuge Ranch, taking good care to arrive there just after dark.

Cowboy Tom saw him coming at a gallop, and met him as he came to a halt.

Having seen the man the day before, and heard Kingdon call him by name, he sung out:

"Is you Cowboy Tom?"

"I is."

"Well, you is the man I wants ter see, for the cap'n sent me."

"Whar is Buck?"

"Over in the cabin yonder, getting his supper."

"Who are you?"

The reply was a pistol shoved into his face, a grasp upon the throat and the low-uttered words:

"Give an outcry, a move and I will kill you."

The man was completely cowed by the suddenness of the attack, and he made not the slightest resistance.

With wonderful celerity Surgeon Powell bound him with his lariat, and then forced a corner of his bat into his mouth as a gag, binding it there securely.

Then he led him to the piazza and tied him to a post.

Quietly seating himself, he awaited the coming of Buck.

He had not long to wait, for the man soon appeared, and came directly up to him, to find the muzzle of a pistol in his face, and hear the words:

"Hands up, pard, or die!"

Up went the outlaw's hands, for he knew that Tom must be dead or a prisoner, and he supposed that there were others near.

"I'll take your weapons," said the Surgeon Scout, and he suited the action to the words.

"Now stand against that post."

The man sullenly obeyed, and he was very quickly bound securely with a rope that hung on his saddle lying on the piazza, for a light shone out of the sitting-room door full upon it.

"Are there more of you here?" asked Powell.

"Two heathen Chinese."

"They are not dangerous."

"Now give the key to the room where those ladies are."

"It is in the door."

Surgeon Powell stepped to the door and knocked.

"Who is it?" asked Mabel.

"A friend, and I have come to rescue you, as I have your guards secure."

"I am Surgeon Frank Powell, Miss Manners, and an old friend of your father."

A cry of joy came from within, and unlocking the door, Surgeon Powell found himself in the presence of Mabel and Camille Cameron.

Explanations followed, the Chinese were called in, and Mabel saying that they could be trusted, Surgeon Powell rode back to his camp, leaving them in charge of the prisoners.

He soon changed his attire for his uniform, and within two hours was back again at the ranch.

To his surprise he learned that Camille Cameron was the sister of the young lieutenant then in command of his supporting force, and he remembered that the officer had told him that he had a sister who had disappeared most mysteriously from home, and it was supposed had taken her own life, through grief for the loss of her lover, who had been killed in a duel.

As he was anxious to reach the camp of Lieutenant Carter Cameron, the Surgeon Scout decided to start at once, and take his prisoners with him, leaving Mabel and Camille under charge of the Chinese, whom they vouched for as being faithful.

"You will see your brother soon, Miss Cameron, for we will return by here, while you, Miss Mabel, need no longer fear your husband, I assure you."

The words of the surgeon were significant,

and Mabel remembered them long after he had ridden away from the ranch, and afterward had good reason to recall them to mind.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

THE Surgeon Scout reached the Bald Knob Canyon on the afternoon of the day following his departure from Refuge Ranch.

He had his prisoners firmly tied to their saddles, so felt no fear of their escape, and he pressed on as rapidly as he could.

His other horse he had left at the ranch, so there was little to delay him, and he reached the secret camp of Lieutenant Cameron and his men without delay.

A scout on duty saw him, and not long after he rode up to the camp of the young lieutenant.

Carter Cameron was a handsome fellow, one who had distinguished himself, and was a general favorite.

"I'm delighted to see you, Powell, and I see that you have some game," and he nodded toward the two prisoners.

"Yes, they are Owls," was the reply, and Powell told his story, and then said:

"Now, Cameron, I have good news for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, for you have grieved for a long time over one who was not dead."

"Great God! my sister you refer to?"

"I do, and she is safe and well," and the surgeon told the story as he had heard it from Camille herself.

"I promised that you would soon be with her, and now let us prepare for the march, for we must be ready to dash upon those Owls at the moment they make the attack on the train, and I wish to send a scout by a flanking trail, to put the officer in charge on his guard, so that we can give Kingdon and his outlaws a perfect thrashing."

Lieutenant Cameron gave the necessary orders, and at once a scout started upon his mission.

The command got ready to move by nightfall, and when the Sabbath-day sun arose the next morning, they were lying in ambush awaiting to strike their blow.

True to his word, Dick Roberts had come to the rendezvous made with Surgeon Powell, and all was in readiness to strike a death-blow against the Owls of the Overland.

They had not long to wait, for the train soon reached the scene of attack, and the Owls of the Overland dashed out from their ambush.

But the train had already been warned, and, though apparently surprised, they were on their guard, and the outlaws were met by a withering fire.

As they rallied, soldiers dashed up the canyon behind the train, and others came from ahead, and the scene was a startling one.

The Overland Owls saw that all was lost, and they made a dash for their liberty.

Some went down dead, others were wounded, but a few got through the fire.

Among these was Kent Kingdon, the chief.

He had a mask over his face, and supposed he was not recognized, until Surgeon Powell called out:

"Kent Kingdon, you are my game."

Then he knew all was lost, that he was known, and that the surgeon had indeed had a motive in coming to Refuge Ranch.

Wheeling in his saddle, he fired his rifle quickly, and the horse of the Surgeon Scout fell dead.

The rider was momentarily stunned, for he fell heavily, and when he became himself once more the chief of the Overland Owls had escaped.

"Lieutenant Cameron, this victory is marred by the escape of Kent Kingdon; but I will pursue him, for I know where he will go."

"You let your wounded and prisoners go on with the train to the fort, and then go by Refuge Ranch and get your sister and Miss Mabel."

"Please ask the latter to at once telegraph her father."

"But, Powell, do not take such a risk."

"I will do so, for that man's life must end."

"I will get back as soon as I can, and Roberts will go with me, so let us have your two best horses."

Urging against his going was useless, and ten minutes after the Surgeon Scout, accompanied by Dick Roberts, started upon the trail of Kent Kingdon, the chief of the Overland Owls.

The trail was taken up at the point where Kingdon was last seen in rapid flight, and it was followed until night.

Then at dawn it was taken up again, and late

in the afternoon the foothills were reached, not very far from the village of Red Dog, the Sioux chief.

Just at sunset Dick Roberts, who had often been sent on a message to Red Dog, by his chief, gave a signal as they came in sight of a heavily timbered hill.

The signal was answered, an Indian warrior came forward and greeted them, and both being recognized they were led to the tepee of Red Dog.

As they approached they saw, seated by the large fire, Kent Kingdon.

Right up to the fire the Indian guide led Powell and the deserter, and he said:

"The great white medicine-man has come to see our chief."

With a cry of alarm Kent Kingdon was upon his feet, and his hand upon his revolver.

But Frank Powell was the quickest to fire, and at his shot Kent Kingdon dropped in his tracks.

All was at once excitement, but the loud voice of Red Dog calmed the tumult, and knowing from his own lips that Kingdon's band was destroyed and he a fugitive, he cared nothing more for him and said:

"The Gold Chief would have killed my white brother the mighty medicine-man."

He made a motion to his braves, and Kent Kingdon, still breathing, was carried away from the camp-fire.

"I have come to see my red brother, the mighty chief of the Sioux, for I was afraid his wound might be bad," said the Surgeon Scout coolly.

"My white brother has a big heart, and he is welcome. He can do the Red Dog much good."

Not willing to lose any more time in the Indian camp than he could help, Powell at once began to look at the chief's wounded leg and, having dressed it again, told him that he could not be doing better.

"My medicine-men have done as my brother told them," said Red Dog, and he wished the Surgeon Scout to remain all night.

But he told him that there were many wounded men to look after among his own people, and leaving the old scamp under the impression that he had come simply to dress his wounded leg, Powell took his departure accompanied by Dick Roberts.

Back to the fort they made their way and arrived without further accident, only half a day behind Lieutenant Cameron and his men, who had gone to Refuge Ranch and escorted Mabel and Camille to Fort Advance, where the warmest welcome had been given them by all.

Dick Roberts was very nervous about going back to the fort, but Surgeon Powell said that all would be well, and he led him at once to Colonel Rayal and told his story, and gave him the credit of the detention of the Overland Owls.

"Now, colonel, I have promised this man a pardon, so I beg you to make an application to that effect and send it on, sir."

"It shall be done, Powell, and Roberts can remain at headquarters here until it is heard from," was the reply.

Then Surgeon Powell sought Mabel and as she warmly greeted him, he said:

"I told you, Miss Mabel, that your wicked husband should trouble you no more."

"I now confirm my words, for you are free from him forever."

The lips quivered, the head drooped and Mabel turned away to hide her emotion.

But she soon recovered her self-control and said:

"It is over now, sir, and he shall be banished from my heart. I owe all to you, my dear friend, and Heaven ever bless you."

"And Horace Manners is avenged through you, Surgeon Powell, and I am no longer a Nemesis," said a voice near, and Camille Cameron came forward and joined them.

Several days after Carter Cameron got a leave to go and escort his sister and Mabel East, and, her own home having been broken up, Camille accepted the pressing invitation given her to go to St. Louis, and they arrived to find a warm welcome indeed from Doctor Manners and his wife, for they had telegraphed their coming, and the news had rapidly cured Mrs. Manners of all sorrow and illness.

That night in the hospitable home of Doctor Manners, the story was told all over again, and then Mabel said softly:

"From this night I am Mabel Manners once more, and I beg of you all never again speak to me of the man who so nearly wrecked my life, the man who caused us all so much of sorrow, and who, under the face of an angel had the heart of a fiend."

THE END.

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